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UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA

NEVER STEPPING IN THE SAME RIVER TWICE: TEACHING AND WRITING IN SCHOOL

BY

REBECCA LUCE-KAPLER

A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree of Master of Education

DEPARTMENT OF SECONDARY EDUCATION

Edmonton, Alberta
SPRING 1994

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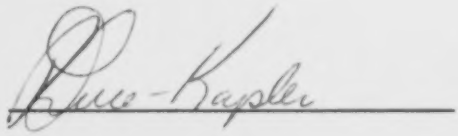

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FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES AND RESEARCH

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April 12, 1994

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March 14, 1994

Mrs. Pat Stevens
1169-2nd Ave. NW
Moose Jaw, Saskatchewan
S6H 3R4

Dear Mrs. Stevens:

I so enjoyed our short conversation on the phone tonight. You sound like you are an educator after my own heart, and I know from your husband's poem that he and I share a similar view about conversations with children. I appreciate having your permission to reprint his poem in my master's thesis.

Perhaps you would like to know a little more about the context of my thesis. I spent several months doing research in a language arts class where I spoke to students about their writing and the difficulties and joys they had with writing in school. (I have been a language arts teacher and a writer for ten years.) When the study came together, it explored what it is like to be a teacher, a writer, and a student in language arts class. The chapter where I use "Grade Five Geography Lesson," focuses on the students' words and their thinking about writing. Your husband's poem mirrored my experience so elegantly that I couldn't imagine not using it Thank you so much for your generosity.

When my thesis has been defended, I will send you a copy so you can see where the poem resides.

Sincerely yours,

Luce-Kapler

Rebecca Luce-Kapler

I hereby grant permission for Rebecca Luce-Kapler to use Barry Steven's poem, "Grade Five Geography Lesson," in her Master's thesis.

.....

Pat Stevens

DEDICATION

This work is dedicated

to my mother who always told me I was a writer,

to my father for reading me "Paddy's Christmas and telling me other stories,

and to Kevin, Sara, and Mike for believing in me always.

ABSTRACT

Like rounding the bend of a river, plunging beneath the surface of a lake, finding shelter in the middle of the woods, or discovering roses on your doorstep, writing reveals the unexpected. So does research.

I entered a grade seven language arts classroom to study writing portfolios. As the teacher and students told me about the difficulties and joys of teaching and writing, I found myself immersed in a context where I had no choice but to re-examine my own life as a student, a writer and a teacher. I had to face my discomfort at being a writer who taught. I had to admit my resentment about never seeming to have enough time to write. And I had to look closely at the institution where I had spent over ten years of my life working.

I learned that schools often are not kind places for writers, no matter what teachers try to do. Their structure encircles, inhibits, and controls us. We are exhorted to share our selves even while those selves are under scrutiny. I watched and searched for the times when writing could happen in the classroom to see what they had in common.

What those times do share, I discovered, is that they make a place for writing--not just physical room, but also the space within the self. Writers need choice, opportunity, and flexibility to discover what and how they think. Sometimes these places can be created by using portfolios. They become gathering spots and a dialogic location to explain, display, or come to understand the work. Other times, place is created by offering or discovering experiences that make the familiar strange or the strange familiar. Place also is created when we see that boundaries are no longer stopping places and retainers, but are the unfolding of opportunity.

My research was written like a novel while my novel was a piece of research. Fiction mingles with fact, and truth wobbles to reveal another interpretation of life; another horizon of opportunity.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Every writer needs someone who understands what it means to write; someone who will know when to stand out of the way and when to encourage. Thanks to John Oster for being that kind of person and for believing that I wrote the thesis I needed to write.

Schools were the thread that pulled this study together. Although I shared the memories of many classrooms, I am especially grateful to the teacher and students who participated and shared so many of their thoughts about writing and school, and who were so central to this work.

A special thanks to Dennis Sumara for his challenging questions, constant encouragement, and friendship.

I appreciate my friends and colleagues for their perceptive comments and never-ending support: Kathy Smith, Susan Walsh, Ingrid Johnston, Jill McClay, Margaret Mackey, and J.C. Couture.

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And finally, every writer needs people to keep her off balance. Thanks to two uncles who don't live in Vancouver: Andy and Chris.

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INTRODUCTION

A writer's life is about examination.

-Natalie Goldberg, *A Long Quiet Highway*

"All things flow, nothing abides." Nearly 2500 years ago Heraclitus made that observation after realizing that it is impossible for a person to step in the same river twice. From one moment to the next, new water arrives, the current changes, a stray leaf falls from a tree onto the surface or a school of fish glide by. Like the river, Heraclitus speculated, everything else in the universe is in a state of becoming rather than in a state of being.

Writing and teaching are never the same; they are always becoming. From moment to moment, day to day, nothing can ever be exactly as it was before. At my desk, I read a new book, learn a new word, feel more tired, receive news that a story will be published, write a poem--unlike yesterday. In school, a student is absent, the snow falls outside, the principal is walking down the hall, we are reading a new story, I am energetic--unlike the previous class.

Returning to a language arts classroom to research writing revealed the river for my exploration. I stopped for a time and looked back and began to see where I had been travelling: the water that swirled about my feet, the curve of the banks, the speed of the flow, the colour of the water. Now I feel newly awakened to the river. The sunlight dances off the water as the jackfish swim in shadows; my toes slip over the rocks while my ankles deflect the eddy of whirlpools; wet mud and decaying bulrushes permeate the air; a redwing blackbird cries in a rusty voice.

I am part of the river. Be coming.

CHAPTER ONE

VIOLATING *SUB ROSA*: A WRITER SPEAKS OUT

> Women will starve in silence until
> new stories are created which
> confer on them the power of
> naming themselves.
>
> -Sandra Gilbert and Susan Guber[1]

I find my place
only
to discover i've moved
some
times i'm
on a merry chase wo(a)ndering
where I am

(October, 1993)

A Toe in the Water

Never did I expect to begin by describing my own tremblings about my writer-self being exposed when I entered a classroom to "do research." But it is here where I must begin because it was through this experience that I had to stop running away and reconcile why I felt I could no longer live as a writer in schools. I had to ask what that said about me, what that said about schools, and, in particular, what that said about writing in schools.

At first, coming as a researcher to a grade seven classroom felt comfortable and familiar. The warm fall day was like so many others had been during my six years of teaching grade seven. I expected and anticipated the students' energy and curiosity about who I was and what I would be doing with them. Nearly everyone wanted to volunteer to be in my group and with every visit there were

invitations to read their stories as if I were an editor from a publishing house and they were prospective authors. With the pressing of manuscripts into my hands, the questions in the eyes, and the asking, I seemed to slip into being teacher as easily as shrugging on a familiar coat. But I was not there to be their teacher. I thought I had come to learn more about writing portfolios, and I was ready to watch, listen, and learn. I observed classes, interviewed students, and had conversations with the teacher and almost without realizing it, my teacher coat fell away and something else began to emerge.

Deborah Britzman, in *Practice Makes Practice*, talks about the multiple and conflicting meanings of teaching and learning that shift with our lived lives. This, in itself, is not a problem. The difficulty occurs when this multiplicity of meaning is suppressed, inhibiting the ability to imagine doing things differently. Britzman sees this suppression as a response to the "dilemmas of carving out one's own teaching territory within preordained borders, of desiring to be different while negotiating institutional mandates for uniformity, and of struggling to construct one's teaching voice...."[2]

As I stepped back from my usual role in the classroom, some of the borders and boundaries that surrounded me fell away. I began to question how I had taught writing, how I had thought about my own writing in connection with my teaching, and even how my writing as a student differed from my writing as an adult unconstrained by classroom demands. The sorted and isolated threads of my experience began to unwind and connect as they knitted into new understandings.

When I taught in public schools, I had carefully

divided my writing into two compartments. In one were all the words writers use to give writing a cachet of mystique and glamour. These words hide their naked obsession to write and their fear that their stories will dry up and disappear, leaving them silenced. For my students, I chose such words to speak of the writer's voice and the search to find it. I exhorted them to write about what they knew and to wallow in the glory of their visions and revisionings. Such nurturance gave writing a patina that I thought would motivate and encourage students. A recollection of my thinking appeared in a 1993 journal entry:

> Sam Robinson's text, *Bridges*, came out and I persuaded the school to buy a class set. Here was a book that talked about using the writing process, sharing writing in the classroom among students and teachers, and publishing the work for various audiences (1985). I felt like I had come home. Here was recognition that writing was more than just assigning pieces and sending students away to write. Here was the understanding that writing needed thought, nurturing, and feedback.[3]

In the other compartment was all my desire for writing; the passion to immerse myself in story and imagery no matter what. I often regretted the hours that school demanded while I lusted after time to write. The struggle between being a caring, capable professional and a self-absorbed, credible writer was exhausting. My desire to write was often suppressed, sacrificed. Hélène Cixous' thoughts could be mine:

> Wouldn't you first have needed the "right reasons" to write? The reasons, mysterious to me, that give you the "right" to write? But I didn't know them. I had only the "wrong" reason; it wasn't a reason, it was a passion, something shameful--and disturbing; one of those violent characteristics with which I was afflicted. [4]

In writing I felt the power of my voice speaking without constraint from institutions and those with more authority. I could submerge in the passion within my study, in front of my computer or with my notebook on my lap, and quietly take back some of the power. Only by enveloping myself in this way did it seem I could survive:

> I remember having to stop reading Tillie Olsen's book *Silences* when I was a young mother with two young children and trying desperately to find time to write. Her words made me feel that there was no hope, that I should give up. But I couldn't give up. It was my only sanity in that little 900 square foot house where I was so much alone. Without writing, I would have flown on the wind away from that house to be plastered against the glass of someone's front window, my mouth open in a silent scream.
>
> (November, 1993)

To let my students see this passion would be to leave me naked, exposed to their scrutiny, shivering in the cold light. Instead, I planned to lead them to the passion without ever revealing my own. Several months into my study it became clear just how far apart my passion and my teaching had been:

> I have been a writer in hiding, in denial. Like a thief in the night, I snatch word moments here and there, putting them to page and then folding them into origami boxes or into airplanes that I fly out the window through the air to land uncertainly in readers' backyards.
>
> I have pretended to be a teacher. Not a teacher who is a writer. Maybe a teacher who writes sometimes. When no one is looking. But not when she's in the classroom.
>
> Why have I kept my writer self so far from the classroom? I talk the good talk with students. Ask me about writing, I'll tell you anything. I'll enthuse. I'll encourage. I'll even scribble a few words onto scraps of paper while you write

madly--at my insistence. But why don't I ever bring my real writing into the classroom?

I remember twice when I did. Twice in all those years of teaching! Once was just after I had had a story published in an anthology. I was proud of being in a real book. I was nervous as I held the book up for the grade eight class to see. My name was on the cover! Their teacher was a writer. Then I read "The Rawleigh Man," my story about a travelling salesman who is tormented by two adolescent girls. It was short, full of prairie, entirely suitable for thirteen year olds, but what I remember most were the two girls who sat near the front of the class exchanging notes. Without missing a beat in my story, I held out my hand for the note that was reluctantly given to me. Afterwards, when the class left without saying a word, I opened it. "What a boring story," it said. "Yeah," was the scribbled reply.

Another time, many years later, I remember despairing that my students didn't know how to revise, so I decided to try again, to bring my real writing into the classroom. But I chose carefully. It was one page of a story that I had written long ago and had no real intention of revising. When I put it up on the overhead, they enthusiastically gave me revision suggestions, feeling that they were really being helpful. They didn't know that I refiled that story when I got home under "old stuff" and shut the drawer.

I have been a fraud.

(November, 1993)

What has been the cost of hiding my passion? I'll never know for sure, but Jordan*, one of the girls in my study, made a comment that haunts me. "If you have an idea," she said, "write it at home....don't let it burst because you just write a better story than you will in school where you're worried about marks and stuff." She too divided her

---

* The names of all participants in the study have been changed. Also, their comments have been edited to avoid repetition and extraneous words.

writing into what she was required to do publicly at school and what she could indulge in privately at home. It seemed that rather than teaching students to be writers, we were teaching them to be writers in schools, which is quite a different practice.

Under Currents: The *Sub Rosa* Text

> I have a score to settle with
> Knowledge because it terrorizes
> me from the moment it forces me
> to school, that is, forces me to
> learn more about the master's
> fantasies than about knowledge
> itself.
> -Nicole Brossard[5]

Sub rosa, a Latin term meaning "under the rose," refers to something done or said in strict confidence. Its roots lie in the story of Cupid who used a rose to bribe Harpocrates, the God of Silence, so he would not reveal the amours of Venus. Roses were later sculpted onto the ceilings of banquet rooms to remind guests that what was spoken under the influence of wine was not to be repeated.[6] During the sixteenth century, roses appeared over confessionals and in the westerly rose windows of cathedrals, reminding the speaker and listener of secrecy.

But how private can *sub rosa* really be? We are entrusting another person with our privileged information and even though the vow has been taken or some solemnity observed, what guarantee is there that at some point the other person will not let a detail slip or use the knowledge for personal gain? Breaking confidence is a common occurrence if I think of examples from my own life and the number of stories that use it as an important plot device. Rather than an ensured confidentiality, speaking *sub rosa*

may only be a means to pry loose our secrets, a false security.

In some ways, writing in school is like revealing secrets under the rose. The teacher asks students to write about what they know, what they feel, and what they think. They are told that they can make the decisions for their writing: which topic will be chosen, what will be disclosed, which peer comments will be disregarded or incorporated, and which draft will be the final one handed in. Students are cautious about what they reveal, however, because they know that ultimately, no matter what is said, they do not own their texts. The audience is predetermined by class lists, the fate of the writing is often decided by the teacher, and their words will be weighed and evaluated by others. As Jafar pointed out in one of our group discussions during the study, he had learned early who his school writing was for:

> I had this teacher in grade four. And what she wanted was your writing had to be neat and at that point my writing wasn't as neat as it is right now. So if it was really messy, I used to get Cs and Ds when I was in grade four for as best as I could do, and she just ripped up my work and just said do it over again. See, I don't agree with that.

When the authority over the texts and over the revelation of private thoughts lies outside oneself, there is a strong sense of restraint in what is said and disclosed. What can be seen as opportunities to speak, may instead silence the speaker, and it is this silencing that is the other, darker side of *sub rosa*--the rose side.

Roses are strongly identified with the feminine. In the Orient, they were the flowers of the Goddess. Because of the connection to Cupid, Romans came to know roses as the

flower of Venus. The Gnostic scriptures told of Psyche's menarchal blood sprouting a rose when she became enamoured of Eros. Arabian stories described a paradise called Gulistan, the Rose Garden, featuring the rose of love, the name of which refers to female genitals. In the Christian version of the Virgin Goddess, Mary was connected to the rosary or "rose-wreath" and was often featured as the center of rose windows. Some believe that the immaculate conception was brought about through the magic of the rose.[7] Influenced by such metaphors, can speaking under the rose be seen as speaking under the feminine where words may be controlled, hidden, or dismissed?

When considering the historical significance and power of words, this silencing hardly seems surprising. In Ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia, writing systems were difficult and available only to the wealthy and privileged who could spend the time studying them. The class of scribes were elite and maintained that exclusivity through strictly disciplined schools, rigourous expectations, and a conservative approach. There were certainly no female scribes. In Judaism and Islam, writing was for religious purposes; women were thought too low to tamper with writing the name of God. In later times, writing was allowed for women when it made them a greater asset to men. They might be encouraged to use calligraphy or write poetry for male entertainment, or they might be allowed limited literacy if it would lead them to a religious life, such as into the Catholic Church.[8] But always the writing was controlled and care taken that there would be no dissemination of ideas against those in power. This silenced women and others who had no privilege or position in society.

As a reflection of society, schools too have long

controlled writing. Despite recent changes to writing pedagogy where personal voice in writing is encouraged,[9] schools are still places where silencing occurs. There was and is a design to schooling that makes some words more acceptable and that encourages some kinds of writing and not others. Just as students learn to hold back some part of themselves in the writing, so too do they learn which parts to reveal. But from where do such messages spring? We cannot point to individual teachers. They are as caught in the classroom as students. Instead, I think one has to look to the traditional, hierarchal structure of institutions of which schools are one.

In her look at the feminization of teaching, Madeleine Grumet discusses the kind of structure in classrooms and demands on teachers that ensure they establish a paternal authority which thus controls or silences the personal voice. Grumet explains that as the industrialized state grew in its need for workers regimented in the order of bureaucracy and industry, more teachers were required. Since the importance of work in the home had lessened, women were enticed into the teaching profession by appealing to their maternal instincts. However, individuals who were lured into the profession for their nurturing qualities, found that the work in the classroom became increasingly mechanized and impersonal so that they could not "sustain human relationships of sufficient intimacy to support the risks, the trust, and the expression learning requires".[10] Instead, they were delivering their students to a patriarchy with its disdain for the private and the familiar. In a setting where the private and familiar are denied, or where the private and familiar feel out-of-place and awkward, neither teachers nor students will risk personal expression.

If classrooms replicate paternal authority as Grumet describes, then what are our expectations for writing in the classroom? It seems that we are hoping students will hook into the passion of writing without affording them the place where this can be accomplished. Perhaps as teachers, we need to be more honest about the writing that can occur there. Can it ever be a place where students are strongly connected to their texts in meaningful ways? Can it be a place where they are able to choose what is private and what is public? Or will their voices be silenced by knowing that the words are not theirs to command?

I want to continue asking students to write. I want to express to them my joy in writing, to feel like Cixous: "Ourselves in writing like fish in the water, like meanings in our tongues, and the transformation in our unconscious lives".[11] But I cannot. At least not until I look more closely at the reasons for my own turning away and the discomfiture that students and teachers feel in the writing classroom. Only by exploring what came before, can I imagine what might be coming. Only by letting the barriers fall can the multitude of meanings in my teaching and my writing surface. The rose petals must be scattered.

The Writer Dives In

> Sometimes I think I began writing in order to make room for the wandering question that haunts my soul and hacks and saws at my body; to give it a place and time; to turn its sharp edge away from my flesh; to give, seek, touch, call, bring into the world a new being who won't restrain me, who won't drive me away, won't perish from very narrowness.
>
> -Hélène Cixous[12]

I need to start at the genesis of a writer. I need to follow the trace, searching for hesitation and celebration. I need to begin in a dimly lit room nearly forty years ago.

I am in a white metal crib in my parents' room. Above their bed is a shaded reading light. I am surrounded by picture books and catalogues which I pat and whose pages I turn, fascinated by the pictures revealed anew moment by moment. There is a sense of security in the warm bed, the dimly lit room, and the books that encircle me like the bricks of a wall.

When my father waxes nostalgic, he still likes to tell of how I demanded my books before I would sleep and how I disdained the stuffed toys. He tells, too, of one story that I made him read over and over. "Paddy's Christmas" was a tale about bears hibernating except for the littlest one who awakens and goes in search of Christmas spirit. Daily, for close to a year, I demanded that story be read for it encompassed two of my favourite things: Christmas and the name of my babysitter, Paddy. I could catch any line that he missed and corrected what I thought were his misreadings. That felt like my story.[13]

This fascination with the hearing of story eventually became a fascination with the telling of it and then the realization that people wrote books, and that maybe I could do so to. I don't remember when that realization occurred. I don't think it happened in a flash of blinding light, but rather was a gradual awakening to the possibility. What I do remember is my first publication: a tale about the Easter bunny written in grade three during my first freewriting experience and later published in a national Sunday school magazine.[14] Then at the end of grade four, the teacher

commissioned me to write a play--a slapstick piece about a Mexican bandit--that the class performed for the parents. With both events, I remember a certain sense of maturity and responsibility. I also remember a strong connection with my audience, at least those who were near enough to pat me on the back. The pleasure of such recognition made me vow to be a writer.

In grade six, I could scarcely believe my luck when the teacher told us that we would be writing novels. She presented each of us with a cream coloured scribbler and every day sat in her desk and let us work our way through the pages of that scribbler. I lost myself in the life of a pioneer family travelling across the prairies in a covered wagon. (The impact of reading *Little House on the Prairie* had long been with me.) There were no constraints except time and the limits of my own imagination. When we were finished our novels and the teacher had read them, she asked to keep mine. "It was a very good story," she told me, and one that she would "want to read to future classes."

Since the rest of my writing from that time has blurred together into a swirl of words where no work distinguishes itself from another, I wonder what it is that helps me remember these pieces. I find it is interesting that the strongest memories I have of writing in elementary school were an instance outside the regular school curriculum and two others where I was allowed to write without interference. Was it just the lack of constraints that these pieces had in common? Yet two of them were evaluated. That would surely attach some restriction. Perhaps it was the recognition. A national publication, an audience for a play, some posterity for a first novel. These were very grown up acknowledgements of one's writing. But although I

think that is a significant reason why I remember the events, there is another part of the memory probably just as important. With all three pieces, I remember being given the space, the time, and the freedom to unleash my writing. Just by closing my eyes, I remember the pleasure of being totally immersed in the work, oblivious to all else. No one was interfering with me or directing me; the decks had been cleared. So although the recognition was satisfying, I don't think it would have existed without the place for writing being prepared for me. But what kind of place could that be?

A place conducive for writing is not a desk or a computer or an inspirational room. In fact, American writer, Annie Dillard notes, "[a]ppealing workplaces are to be avoided. One wants a room with no view, so imagination can meet memory in the dark."[15] What you need, she suggests, is a desk and chair that float thirty feet from the ground and the writer's work is "to keep cranking the flywheel that turns the gears that spin the belt in the engine of belief that keeps you and your desk in midair."[16]

Place, for Natalie Goldberg, is not a room at all. Goldberg, who shares her insights into zen and writing, talks about the "quiet place" from which all the best writing comes. It is the place that is "connected to our breath, our words, and our death....[A] writer must be willing to sit at the bottom of the pit, commit herself to stay there, and let all the wild animals approach, even call them up, then face them, write them down, and not run away."[17]

For me, the idea of place holds both elements--the physical and the spiritual. It must be somewhere where I

feel secure enough to keep my desk in midair, but it also must be the time and freedom to reach the deep inner well of the writer. Most often, in my experience as an adult writer, this has been something I do best for myself, away from others. As a child, I depended on others to help me find that place, but seldom could it happen in the classroom. When I wrote the Easter bunny story, it was my first experience with freewriting; when I wrote the play, I was excused from regular class demands; and when I wrote the novel, the usual structures of a language arts class had disappeared. They were all situations where I was given the opportunity to find the place. When I think about my later experiences with writing in school, the only ones I can describe are similar instances to my earlier time: a combination of circumstances that dropped usual constraints and gave me enough security to let go of external expectations and explore what I could really do.

As my secondary schooling drew to a close, it seemed my only writing opportunities were highly structured essays driven by the demands of the curriculum. Writing them was probably a useful way for me to gather and organize what I knew about a subject, but the emphasis was on the knowledge and not on the writing. The writing-to-show was a regurgitation rather than a coming-to-know what I understood. Most assignments were written at home within a few days of the due date, were handed in, and were returned with sparse comments and a letter grade. My writing had more tedium than sparkle while what I really wanted to do, the telling of story, seemed to have little place in high school. Without further encouragement and direction, I found writing at home a struggle. There were no suggestions and no audience; it was writing in a vacuum. Except for the occasional poem, nostalgic scribbling, and one mediocre

children's novel written during university, my writing became confined to a dream in the back of my mind, and something I would be too self-conscious to share with anyone:

> I have flirted with poetry all my life:
> scribbling the poems of a lonely teenage
> heart during late moonlight nights--
> In the red light
> of a thickening dawn
> I reach to understand--
> bloody metaphor for unfulfilled dreams,
> writing family sagas, scribbling bits on
> pieces of paper, smearing words onto napkins,
> attending seminars, thinking that I hadn't
> got it yet.
> (October, 1993)

Not until after the birth of my first child did the longing to write return. I was home on leave from teaching and lonely. There was something missing for me, and I knew it wasn't school. Finally, the niggling that I had been ignoring grew too strong to deny; the emptiness I felt was my unfulfilled dream of being a writer. I went in search of a way to begin again, and that fall I enrolled in the writing diploma program at Red Deer College. Every week we brought our writing to class and read it to the other students, and every week we discussed and critiqued our writing. After class, we would hand in the piece and have it returned the following time with detailed comments. There were no marks given for anything. We were involved in the process of exploring our writing, of struggling with finding a voice, of learning what it was we had to say. At last I could find the place; it was a joyful awakening.

Even though I learned to find my "quiet place", taking the time, the energy, and the room to plumb its depths has continued to be a struggle. But then whenever you invest

deeply of yourself in anything, it is difficult. Annie Dillard tells a story that vividly describes such an investment:

> One bad winter in the Arctic, and not too long ago, an Algonquin woman and her baby were left alone after everyone else in their winter camp had starved....The woman walked from the camp where everyone had died, and found at a lake a cache. The cache contained one small fishhook. It was simple to rig a line, but she had no bait, and no hope of bait. The baby cried. She took a knife and cut a strip from her own thigh. She fished with the worm of her own flesh and caught a jackfish; she fed the child and herself. Of course she saved the fish gut for bait.[18]

Natalie Goldberg believes, too, that there is no linear process to writing, that there is no logical way to become a good writer. To write, she says, means to deal with your whole life and to use writing to become sane. "Trust in *what* you love, continue to do it, and it will take you where you need to go" (Emphasis is hers).[19]

When I write fiction or poetry, pieces of me, of my flesh, begin the exploration. Sometimes I am carried far from myself, sometimes I am carried deep within myself, but I begin from the same place. I search for the words to construct a path of text that will take me to where I want to be, only to realize that the journey has begun again instead of ended.

My writing is always with me even when I am not holding a pen or sitting at my keyboard. But it was not until I met Emily that I realized the extent to which writing entangles itself in every thread of my life.

The Writer Surfaces

> I turned, fear gushing out of my mouth in silver, panic closing my throat, the scream kept in and choking me. The green canoe was far above me, sunlight radiating around it, a beacon, safety.
>
> -*Surfacing*, Margaret Atwood[20]

Returning to university in the fall of 1992 was important for me. Two years before, I had begun teaching part time in an effort to sort out the dilemma of not having enough time to do the writing I felt needed to do. The balance in my life was better, but it was not a totally satisfying solution. Working part-time in a school was more like having a reasonable full-time job. Timetabling difficulties meant that there were seldom chunks of space in a day when I could really immerse myself in writing. I decided to take a complete break to reassess the situation.

The first year at university, as it neared an end, did not seem to be enough. I wanted more time, and I still hadn't really done much thinking about what I needed to do: Could I still be a teacher? Would I have enough space to write? Taking another year would give me the time I still needed and the opportunity to focus on my writing in a more systematic way than I had for some time. That is when the "Emily Project" came into being.

The project was intended to be an independent study of Canadian painter, Emily Carr. I planned to read her work and read other's work about her and then respond by writing in various genres. The project quickly grew to become more than an exploration of Emily Carr's life. It became an exploration of my own life and a revelation of how firmly pieces of myself wind through my writing in ways that I only

dimly imagined before.

> It's a curious effect to read someone else's journal day after day about times that happened before you were born. I get caught up in the daily life until it also begins to feel like my own life and like I live in two places at once. It gives me an odd sense of leaving linear time behind, and a feeling that not much on the basic, human scale changes, just the players. It also stretches me over my own life so I dip in and out of different times. There's a sense of threads being tugged and then woven back into the picture.
>
> (November, 1993)

When I felt ready to write more than journal entries, the first poem began with Emily's voice harkening back to her old studio and her struggle to capture the tumultuous life of a British Columbia forest. I found myself answering her voice with a short poem I wrote ten years ago:

Old eagles, do you feel
my memories come creeping
back to you
in your entombed,
cobwebby darkness?
Your strong talk
rustles my bones
rhythms thud through forest
swirl into sky with hurricane
spiral spirit
calls others in passing
stirs life in
Womanheart

> Prairie child soul stretches horizons
> soars over dome sky with feet sunk in loamclay
> scattering heartbeats over fields springing
> barley and sweet clover[21]

The locations from which we were speaking were being established: my voice would call over mountains into the forests and Emily's would roll back across the prairies. I

imagined that we would talk as women who were passionately involved in artforms. But the dialogue emerging was not always congenial or easy; instead, it was often difficult and ambiguous.

> Many times I don't like Emily. She is human, is a woman after all. No saintly goddess this one....I think I was hoping that there was some formula I could apply to my life, but I should know better. Formulas don't create artists/women. The one thing I do hear is her passion; the passion of lifeforce, to feel the need to paint even when not painting, to want to do none other. Passion is the secret. Something women aren't supposed to talk about much less have.
>
> (September, 1993)

Mother said Grandmother
stopped making love
when her youngest
four girls, no sons

came

Did you start-stop too?
Lying beside a man did you
creep away from warm
searching hands
and middle-sag bed

Or did moonlight
flood your face
gleam in fire eyes
strike shafts of desire
and secret midnights in forest hearts
as you stirred ochre
cerulean blue seduced
by passion swirl
splashing onto canvas

be coming

January, 1935

The spatter of loves' blood is upon one's hand, red blood that congeals and turns black and will not wash off the

cruel hands. It does not hurt the killed; it hurts the killer. Maybe if I had not killed love I would have had more intensity for the love side in my painting.

Rip away the delicate skin,
pale and fragile in artificial light
The roiling passionate blood
the throb of life
the panting of desire
Flood them onto canvas[22]

As I continued to read her stories and her journals, I found at times I grew impatient with her feelings to the point where I had to close the book I felt so irritable and headachy. But I began to learn that this was the pattern of our relationship and in reflecting on that, I realized that likely it was the difficult bits of my own life that she was speaking to, and that it was this discomfort that created some of the best dialogues and opened meaningful places from which I could write.

I feel out-of-sorts. For two or three days now.
A cork on water, leaves on the wind. Aimless,
wrung out. I don't want to sit at my computer;
I don't know how to start. There is a
disconnection, my phone call keeps getting the
busy signal. I'm afraid of losing it--the writing,
I mean--and I would die. It is my breath.
(October, 1993)

What is that you are struggling for? What is that vital thing the woods contain, possess, that you want? Why do you go back and back to the woods unsatisfied, longing to express something that is there and not able to find it? [23]

Other times, our voices blended together so easily that one story could be heard such as with this lament for dead children:

ONE

Sophie and the other women
arrive to cry
torrents of tears
Afterwards
Sophie walks to the water bucket
fills her tin basin
and washes each face
drying tears with a towel

In the centre of the room
a black skirt hides
the packing case
support for a small white coffin
Candle light at the head
another at the foot
Little girl
holds a doll
that hasn't left her
for a week prior
glassy doll eyes
closed child eyes

ANOTHER ONE

A doll in an iron carriage
rolling above white ink:
Jones Baby, 1914
Porcelain skin tiny
fingers folded over white
lace in parody delicate
innocence, the smooth face of dreams
forever a baby

THREE MORE

How they could stick up so straight with no support at that age was surprising. They had embroidered robes three times as long as themselves, and the most amazing expressions on their faces. Their six eyes were shut as tight as licked envelopes--the infants, clearly, had tremendous wills, and had determined never to open their eyes. Their little faces were like those of very old people; their fierce wrinkles seemed to catch and pinch my stare, so that I could not get it away. I stared and stared. Louisa found me staring.

I said, "Whose babies are those?"

"Mother's tripples," she replied grandly.

"You mean they were Mrs. Green's babies?"

"Yes, the only tripples ever born on Queen Charlotte

Islands."

"Did they die?"

"One died and the other two never lived. We kept the dead ones till the live one died, then we pictured them all together."

AND COUNTING

There is a story told of a child who died on the prairies during the 'flu epidemic of 1918. So many people had died that they were running out of coffins, and a local carpenter was trying to help out. For this dead child, he collected ends of wood left over from other coffins. That's all he had. When they brought the coffin out, they discovered that it was too short for the little girl. They had to break her legs to fit her in.

THOSE NEVER COUNTED

Emily left her painting and two friends
in San Francisco
Ishbel Dane died in hospital
over Christmas
The informant wrote
Under the circumstances
perhaps it was for the best
Now Ishbel will know no shame

Later
Nellie shot herself
in the head
No one knows if
this was for the best
too

AND THOSE COUNTED OUT

Sophie's basin of water mingles
with my tears and those of friends
As we cry I feel
the soft nub
of her towel

It was this dark/light relationship between Emily and me that shaped the collection of writings. When I laid all the pages around me, I discovered both the celebration and despair of art and womanhood. As I arranged the writing, one page led to another, to another, like Ariadne's thread

connecting one voice to another through the labyrinth. This search for a shape, a pattern, began to reveal how I thought about being a woman and a writer. Along with Emily's frustrations and searchings, I explored my own.
There were images of being watched, of being the watcher, of being silenced and holding back the screaming, of dying. Secrets were wanting to be told; the *sub rosa* needed to be broken.

Mother crying icecream
while Grandmother swathed
in midnight white flannel
pointed at the skirt
That's semen!
They'll rip open
your legs
hurt you
draw blood
It's dirty

Read this
Mother handed over the book
of Kotex top secrets
tell your sisters and
don't start you
can't stop you can't
stop you
My daughter
not yet two
explores training
pants discovers
labia Don't touch
yourself there
Mother cries
It's dirty and
I feel twinges
of painful recognition
I bite my lip
till it bleeds
my daughter grimaces
as I insist
It's natural
It's wonderful
You can have babies
as my heart thuds
dirty, dirty, dirty
with the echo
of generations

As I found myself writing from deep within my "quiet place," I realized how strongly writing helped define my life, but along with that realization, I could see where I had denied writing in my life. And that absence, I began to see, had affected me just as deeply.

Living Silence
In the darkness of summer night
without full moon
I listen to sounds across the lake
until there is silence
a living silence
lush with possibility
that drapes about my shoulders
embracing

The Writer Steps Out

> Sometimes when you are working, part of you seems chained like a bird I saw in England once, tied by a thread on its leg to a bush. It fluttered terribly, and I went to see what was wrong. The string cut through the leg as I came and the bird fluttered harder. The leg was left on the bush with the string, and the bird was free. Has one always to lose something, a very part of them, to gain freedom? Perhaps death is like that, the soul tearing itself free from the body.
>
> -Emily Carr[24]

Even though I chose to teach, the entire time I worked in schools, I thought about needing more time to write. I would worry that my writing career was slipping away and would fret about finding the time in a day for writing. Still, I wondered why I didn't throw over everything to stay home and write. Why not make the ultimate artistic sacrifice? What was the thread that held me fluttering

madly?

But now that I've left for a time, I can look back at the part of myself that remains tied to schools, and I can see that I did want to teach, and I can identify some of my discomfort. It seemed to me that most of my conflict was created between how I thought writing was supposed to be taught in schools and how I wrote at home.

I know that I didn't feel the classroom was a place where I could write even though there are many educational writers who insist upon the importance of writing with students.[25] But whenever I tried, it seemed I always had to be alert to the students' questions and rustlings. Why couldn't they simply let themselves be absorbed in writing as I wanted to be? Why couldn't they find their place to do this? There never seemed to be a time when I could act like the kind of writer I was at home; it felt like I was putting on an act, being a phoney. My writing was cardboard.

The support materials at first had seemed like the answer. I was excited about the way the writing process was laid out.[26] As I taught the process to kids, however, I realized that this did not really mimic writers.[27] I did not brainstorm, write, rewrite, and so on. I did some of those things, sometimes, but mostly I just wrote and it was the revelation of my thinking that encouraged me to find other ways into the quiet place and made me want to revise and re-see what was there. It was not starting with those steps. I think of the words of one of the students in my group. Michael said

> I've got the entire story in my head, right? I've got that line of ideas that I told you about, right? And I just keep going and

going until the line stops.

He knew how he wrote best and that's what he wanted to do.

Although I liked much of what I read about writing in the classroom and appreciated much of the sentiment behind it, the reality was that because I did not feel the classroom was a place where I could write--it felt too public for what I thought of as private work--I was not always convincing to my students. That is not to say that good things didn't happen in my classroom. Students wrote creative pieces, they had fun writing, I enjoyed reading their work, and they learned. But I wonder how much of what we were doing was tainted by the expectations and strictures of the classroom?

Only through using writing portfolios my last year of teaching, did I see a glimmer of possibility for changing how I was teaching writing. Although I used portfolios in only a tentative way, I discovered that they afforded an opportunity for me to form a different kind of relationship with a student. When the two of us sat down to share a portfolio, we had something in common between us that we could point to and talk about privately. This was different than having a writing conference in the midst of their working. They had planned this meeting and thought about it as had I. Now we could mutually create a sense of what it meant to write and to make writing decisions. Somehow the relationship between us changed in subtle ways and I was curious to explore that potential. Could portfolios be the place where writing happened?

This was where I had originally begun with this study--wanting to explore writing portfolios--but now it seemed like it might be only a band-aid solution if I didn't stop

to consider the context. Otherwise, portfolios would just be another *sub rosa*. Somehow, before I could place them in a writing classroom, I had to look at the bigger picture. Was the discomfort with writing and teaching in schools all mine or were there similar feelings from students and other teachers? If I could identify what it was about schools, the place, that created difficulty, perhaps it would be possible to find ways to work in that place as writers who could discover through writing what it was they really wanted to say, and then the true potential of writing portfolios could be seen. But first I had to ask myself if writing could be taught in school at all.

Notes

1. Cited in Carolyn G. Heilbrun, *Writing a Woman's Life*. (New York: Ballantine Books, 1988), 33.

2. Deborah P. Britzman, *Practice Makes Practice* (New York: SUNY Press, 1991), 10.

3. Sam Robinson was the principle editor of this series of books that were designed to help teachers teach writing as a process that included prewriting, writing, revising, editing, and publishing beginning with *Bridges 1* (ON: Prentice-Hall Canada, 1985).

4. Hélène Cixous, "Coming to writing," in *Coming to Writing and Other Essays*, ed. D. Jensen(Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991), 10.

5. Nicole Brossard, "Turning-Platform," in *Aerial Letter*, trans. Marlene Wildeman (Toronto, ON: The Women's Press, 1988), 39.

6. Ivor H. Evans, ed., *Brewer's Dictionary of Phrase and Fable* (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1959).

7. See Barbara Walker, *The Woman's Dictionary of Symbols and Sacred Objects* (San Francisco: Harper & Row Publishers, 1988) for a more detailed exploration of the various meanings associated with roses.

8. Albertine Gaur, *A History of Writing* (New York: Cross River Press, 1984).

9. See for example James Moffet, *Active Voice* (Montclair, NJ: Boynton/Cook, 1981) and Janet Emig, *The Web of Meaning* (Montclair, NJ: Boynton/Cook, 1983).

10. Madeleine Grumet, *Bitter Milk* (Amherst, MA: University Press, 1988), 56.

11. Hélène Cixous, 58.

12. Ibid., 7.

13. "Paddy's Christmas," a story by Helen A. Monsell, was in an elementary school reader called *The New Streets and Roads*, by W.J. Gage and Company. The year that I graduated from high school, my mother rescued one of the old readers from the books slated for incineration. She and my father gave it to me for Christmas.

14. When I use the term "freewriting" here, I am talking about having the opportunity to write whatever I wanted about a topic. In this case, the topic was Easter.

15. Annie Dillard, *The Writing Life* (New York: Quality Paperback Book Club, 1989), 26. In fact, Dillard spends a great deal of time talking about the spaces she has written in and how she has struggled in and with them. After finally pulling the blinds on an intriguing view, she writes, "I would have painted, directly on the slats of the lowered blind, in meticulous colors, a *trompe l'oeil* mural view of all that the blinds hid. Instead, I wrote it." 29.

16. Ibid., 11.

17. Natalie Goldberg, *Wild Mind* (New York: Quality Paperback Book Club, 1990), 28-29.

18. Annie Dillard, 12-13.

19. Natalie Goldberg, *Writing Down the Bones* (New York: Quality Paperback Books, 1986), 2.

20. Margaret Atwood, *Surfacing* (ON: Paperjacks, 1972), 152.

21. From *Sunlight and Shadows*, the title of my work-in-progress about Emily Carr.

22. From *Sunlight and Shadows*. The diary entry is from Emily Carr's journal, *Hundreds and Thousands: The Journals of an Artist* (Toronto, ON: Irwin Publishing, 1966). In my collection of writing, I use italics to indicate Emily's voice.

23. Ibid.

24. Ibid.

25. Some of the writers who emphasize teachers writing with students are Tom Romano, Donald Graves, and Nancie Atwell. Interestingly enough, in *Clearing the Way* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann Books, 1987), Romano talks about how he came to this in stages. First he brought in highly polished pieces, then some pieces that needed more drafting, and finally he was able to write with them. It makes me wonder if I gave up too easily. Nancie Atwell, *In the Middle: Writing, Reading,and Learning with Adolescents*

(Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook Publishers, 1987) writes about the need for a teacher to model her personal experience and writing idiosyncracies to her students. Donald Graves, *Writing: Teachers & Children at Work* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann Books, 1983) describes how teachers can learn to write with students, and how it may be an advantage not to be an expert. He suggests telling them that you don't want to be interrupted while writing. In my experience, this is less than successful in junior high.

26. See Sam Robinson, *Bridges 1* (Scarborough, ON: Prentice-Hall Canada, 1985), or Clayton Graves, *Writing in Context* (Scarborough, ON: Nelson Canada, 1989) for some examples of teaching the writing process to students.

27. See John Willinsky, *The New Literacy: Redefining Reading and Writing in the Schools* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 34. Willinsky tells how ludicrous it might be to think of researchers following professional writers to determine their secrets. He notes how William Faulkner was said to begin his process with whiskey and tobacco among other things. Instead, Willinsky points out, researchers have learned from the writing practices of students. So the idea that writing in the schools is mimicking what professional writers do is often not true.

CHAPTER TWO

DANCING IN THE DARK: TEACHING WRITING IN SCHOOLS

> All makers must leave room
> for acts of the spirit.
> -Ursula Le Guin [1]
>
> What a dangerous activity
> reading is; teaching is.
> -Sylvia Ashton-Warner[2]

Who is the Teacher?

A journal begun when I started teaching secondary English in 1986 lies at the bottom of a drawer. When I pull it out, I have to brush dust from the burgundy covers. The gold embossed lettering proclaims this a "Writer's Diary," and I remember bringing that book into the classroom with some pride. I was teaching English at the secondary level for the first time and was able at last, I thought, to teach what was most important to me. This diary would be a subtle way of announcing how I felt about writing. When my students journalled, I would journal. They might see "writer" on the cover of my elegant book. The first entry written in fuschia ink suggests the anticipation:

> Hardly seems like reality sitting here in front of a class writing in a journal. How did I get here? It's a great challenge to keep on your toes and ahead of the game, but it's exciting too.
> (Monday, September 8)

Almost two weeks later, I notice cracks appearing in my entries. The Sunday entry is perhaps the strangest of all. "I've had a talk with my creative self and we've agreed, she and I, that I'll be rising at 5:00 in order to accomplish

two hours of writing each day." I don't remember ever having spoken to my "creative self" before that time, and I don't remember ever thinking of myself as parts, but in the struggle to retain what I had developed in the five years away from teaching, it seemed I was separating: writer/ teacher. Before when I had taught, I wasn't writing, I didn't have children, and my life had seemed simpler. Now everything was complex, a conundrum of difficulty.

The journal entries continued and so did the five a.m. risings. Even now, the effort and fatigue that I felt every morning, and the panic that my writing was slipping from my grasp seem only a breath away. For the next month, nearly every entry mentions tiredness and trying to find my way and wanting to discover vestiges of my Life Before Teaching. Then the entries begin to thin. Two days are missed, then two more until the very last entry:

> I went to the screenwriting workshop this weekend. Makes me want to be at home--writing.
> (November 10)

The talk of stress and tiredness and teaching are gone; only a wish is left. Reading this entry feels poignant now. This was the beginning of a long struggle to reconcile writing and teaching, and it was the last time I would write in a journal for several years. I had gone into the classroom determined to get students writing and to share my passion with them; what I didn't realize was that it would be difficult to bring what I did as a writer outside school into the classroom. Teaching demands would buffet me and push their way into my life until it felt, at times, that being able to write what I wanted when I wanted had been a dream.

The difficulty of being in the classroom and reconciling the demands are of course not peculiar to teachers who consider themselves devoted writers. My first interview with Karen, the teacher in the class where I did my research, begins very professionally. We talk about her background in education, her approach to teaching language arts, and her philosophy of evaluation. Only a few times do we hint at feelings. Karen tells me about growing up in a home full of books, music, and discussions. She says

> And I think when you're raised like that it becomes second nature to you or becomes part of you...and in teaching you come into a classroom where you have thirty students, many of them not from that kind of environment. I feel quite passionate that I should try and expose them to as much literature and writing as I can.

She has the same desire to enter the classroom and share with students the important passions of her life; I recognize this hope. But it is when the tape recorder is turned off that a telling comment comes. Teaching is exhausting, Karen admits; she doesn't know how long she will be able to do it full-time.

In our next interview, after I have been in her classroom for three months, we are more comfortable together. I no longer feel like I am someone from the outside swooping in. I have watched her teach, seen her deal with difficulty in the classroom, and have exchanged whispered words of encouragement, agreement, or questioning during classtime and afterwards. I know some of her students, and so our dialogue feels more personal. I ask how she felt when she first began teaching. I silently wonder if her experience was like mine. But she does not

seem to have experienced the same kind of angst. She admits it wasn't easy and that it took an enormous amount of time, but there is the sense of a destination reached for her. Hear her words:

> I think the time had come for that...I always wanted to be a teacher...I just couldn't imagine being anything else. That's always been my career in my mind and eventually in reality.

But, as the conversation continues, she talks about the difference between her expectations before she went into the classroom and afterwards. Before, in what she calls her "naive state," she thought only about herself in her own classroom and not about the influence the children might have on her. She describes the complexity of beginning to teach.

> Once you're in there, you realize that there has to be that influence and it can't just flow from teacher to student. That there has to be some interaction. And then the road changes. You have to take different routes. And also there are influences from outside. Before, you never think about teachers interacting with other people, with administration. And there's all the other things that are going on in the school. Lots of things.

The multitude of relationships, the intersecting influences, and the conflicting expectations create a thick context for a teacher to wade through and negotiate. It should not be surprising, then, that we discover some teachers, unlike Karen, who define their role quite narrowly, who try to minimize the number of relationships and influences that may bombard them.

Natalie Goldberg, in *Long Quiet Highway*, spends a good deal of time writing about how we come to know. In one section, she describes a teacher who had narrowly defined his role when she contrasts her former algebra teacher to her Zen teachers. "Mr. Johnson," she says, "disseminated information; his job was not to transmit his being." Then she describes her new teachers:

> The teachers up at Lama transmitted who they were, how they saw the world, how they struggled with their own human lives, and how they understood what it meant to be human in relation to plants, animals, inanimate objects, the earth, and the heavens. They ate with us; they took walks with us; they prayed and sang with us.[3]

Many teachers besides Zen masters may feel they want to transmit their being. Karen speaks of wanting to share her passion for books with students, and I wanted to share being a writer, but I suspect sharing your being in a monastic setting apart from society is much easier to do than in a noisy, confusing, chaotic school.

Some of this difficulty is acknowledged through Goldberg's description of her own teaching experience when she was hired to take the place of a veteran teacher who had quit because she could no longer control her class. Natalie had received her teaching certification six months before and immediately agreed to take the job even though it was a social studies' position, something that she knew nothing about. Her teaching became a matter of trying to maintain control, of trying to keep the confusion to a minimum and then something happened.

> I stood up in the middle of "Please, please, be quiet," and suddenly stopped. The place

> where my chest was sore--it was opening, opening red and enormous like a great peony, and it was radiating throughout my body. I felt the blood flowing in my hands and legs. I turned and looked out the window. I looked at the smoky appearance of the spring cottonwoods near the parking lot. Any day now they would break into leaf. There was a spindly Russian olive near our window. Suddenly it looked beautiful. Then I had one simple vision: I saw myself wandering in autumn fields and I felt that nothing, nothing else was important. This was a profound feeling, a big feeling. It wasn't a passing, momentary flash. I knew I had to stay true to that one vision.[4]

It was an awakening, but not welcomed at that time for her in front of a class. All Goldberg wanted was to keep the class quiet so she could earn enough of a living to continue writing. She understood only that she hated her job. For the next few weeks after the vision, she awoke in the middle of the night, staring, unable to think, troubled, and waiting in vain for sleep. Her experience persisted until she at last marched to the principal's office and gave her notice. Then an interesting thing occurred:

> Each day of that [last] week we did something different. I trusted something inside me, instead of what I thought I should do, and the kids responded. Because I was leaving soon, I didn't feel the restraints of the public school. It was as though that institution was no longer between me and the kids, that massive brick structure had crumbled, a new path had opened, a new way to be together. It wasn't all obvious to me at the time, but it was the beginning of something new.[5]

Goldberg found a way of being in that classroom and a way of sharing her being. Once the structures, the expectations, the entrenched procedures no longer mattered, Natalie found

she could teach. However, she could only do this by deciding to leave the institution.

But what about teachers who don't leave or who ignore the visions that may be sent their way? What happens to them in classrooms? Do they find a way to "be" in school?

The Fictive Teacher

> My face in thine eye, thine in mine appeares.
> -John Donne[6]

My return to teaching was predicated by several fundamental ideas about who I was and what this "who" would be doing in the classroom. Because my earlier teaching experience had lasted only two years in an elementary special education setting, little of what I had learned seemed applicable to a secondary school. In many ways, I was like a student teacher.

In *Practice Makes Practice*, Deborah Britzman explores the construction of teacher identity through a critical ethnographic look at student teachers. Student teachers begin, she reminds us, with particular ideas about what it means to be a teacher. They believe they are well informed because of the years spent as students. But becoming a teacher is not merely a mimetic process. As student teachers move from the observer view of teaching to that of participant,they discover learning to teach is really a process of Self suppression. Britzman points out that

> [F]or many students, pedagogy, is not rooted in the production of knowledge but rather in its public image. For those who leave this world to enter teacher education, their first culture shock

> may well occur with the realization of the overwhelming complexity of the teacher's work and the myriad ways this complexity is masked and misunderstood. But what occurs as well is the startling idea that the taking up of an identity means suppressing aspects of the self. So at first glance, becoming a teacher may mean becoming someone you are not.[7]

The stereotypical images of the profession mean that student teachers "take on" an identity more than construct one. The static images become a goal or final destination. Karen and I talk about the resentment and difficulty we associate with the stereotypical images. We both grew up in families where women were encouraged to be educated and to set their sights on any dream. From all the choices offered to us, we deliberately picked teaching, yet we find and have found that public perceptions of the profession make us question our choices. We've heard people say there is a typical personality that goes into education--a passive type. Even though neither one of us is passive, memory of those comments causes Karen to question. "Maybe when you're eighteen years old," she says, "and your world is still fairly narrow, I wonder if that choice is made because school is the only world you know and where you feel secure?" I agree that I often struggle with having made what is seen as a traditional female choice especially when it is accompanied by the implication that I couldn't do other things. "It's pigeonholing," Karen says.

Awareness of these perceptions and feelings have affected decisions made in my teaching career. I have chosen to continue on toward an academic career at the university instead of going back to a secondary school. Karen's work has recently changed too when she became vice-principal. She tells me

> I chose teaching and my sister chose nursing, but now that we're in our late thirties, she's an administrator, I'm an administrator, so even though we started off on traditional routes, we really are interested in striving up.

We both wonder how much the stereotypical perceptions of teachers have influenced our decisions.

Instead of allowing such static images to strongly influence teacher identity, Britzman advocates an image of teaching that is dialogic; a recognition of the need for critical discourse about the lived contradictions and struggles of teaching. She suggests that "teaching must be situated in relationship to one's biography, present circumstances, deep commitments, affective investments, social context, and conflicting discourses."[8] But why does this seem so difficult in a school? Can a dialogic relationship even be sustained in such a setting?

Madeleine Grumet describes a dialogic relationship when she tells us, "[w]e come to know another through the world and the world through another."[9] In schools, however, the world is pre-determined and the responses given. Instead of the fluidity of an active space where sound, touch, and looking are ways we respond to the Other and the Other responds to us, schools encourage attentiveness to things that have been decided away from the classroom. Experience is ordered through cultural myths, patriarchal conventions, and hegemonic discourse. Instead of dialogue, there is monologue. Administration directs and observes teachers while teachers observe and direct students. There is little "looking back;" the gaze seems unidirectional.

Some teachers, striving to disassociate themselves from

the surveyor/surveyed role, try to adopt reciprocity in their classrooms. But such mutuality fails pedagogy for it is like the gaze of John Donne's lovers: "My face in Thine Eye, Thine in Mine Appeares." It is a look that is blind to the world; an ideal of equality that ensnares both teachers and students, denying the real asymmetry in such a relationship. As Grumet points out, "It disclaims the teacher's power, in the world and in the institution, and in so doing prohibits the student from deconstructing and appropriating the perspective of the teacher's look for his or her own vision."[10]

What happens to the teacher identity, then, if schools discourage dialogic relationships and teachers are influenced by cultural myths and images of teaching? Dennis Sumara calls such teacher identities fictives. He tells us that

> [t]hese constructed identities, because they are a deliberate selection from and recombination of aspects of the Self and the cultural myths and practices of teaching, become *fictives*. As distinct from the Self, these fictives help to perpetuate an *image* of what the Self represents, rather than any real sense of the more complete sense of Self. Similar to other fictive Selves (such as those constructed by and for political figures, rock stars, celebrity athletes) there is a deliberate effort to suppress elements of the Self which do not conform to the image that is to be presented, and at the same time, to keep these fictive constructions masked.[11] (Emphasis his)

There is a danger in this, Sumara points out, for the fictive identity is always aware of its own background, of its suppressed identity. For some teachers, the difference between the two is minimal; for others, it is far greater.

For me, in those few diary entries during the renewing of a teaching career, I realize that I was trying to reshape my identity, to create a fictive self for the classroom. The only difficulty was my suppressed self who was kicking and screaming, and who never allowed her voice to be silenced. The distance between the fictive and suppressed self was too great to allow any degree of long-term comfort.

Karen, on the other hand, felt teaching was just an extension of the work she had been doing at home. "I always felt my role as a mother," she says, "was that of a teacher as well, just because I spent a lot of time with my children doing educational kinds of things."

The way teacher identity is constructed affects the kind of decision-making that goes on in classrooms. It influences how and what we teach and implicates our students. But English language arts classrooms are supposed to be places where identity is explored and constructed in a satisfying and even enjoyable way. Educators often talk about the language arts classroom as a place where self is explored through response to reading, writing about one's Self, and talking about experiences. John Willinksy, in *The New Literacy*, notes how the new forms of work in language and literacy may affect the process of developing the Self. "The *self*," he suggests, "is tenuously formed, multiple and in-process, around both experience and reflection, and that process may be affected by the New Literacy classroom."[12] Karen talks about how much she loves teaching language arts for the freedom to be creative and for the self-exploration. Donald Murray tells us that the most important job of a writing teacher is to be him or herself.[13] Can English language arts classrooms be dialogic places? Or is this another fictive? A beginning point may

be to look at the course itself, at how it has been constructed.

The Fictive Course

> You can become a lost soul in literature just as surely as you can in any activity where you abandon yourself to the decisions of others.
>
> -William Stafford[14]

As someone involved in English education, it is difficult to imagine a time when there wasn't language arts or a course called English. Yet much of what forms the foundation of English education today was shaped only in the last century with the rise of public schooling.[15] The evolution seemed to happen almost by accident, and, as with other aspects in education, was shaped by events and demands from outside the school.

Most language study before the nineteenth century was in the classical languages such as Greek or Latin and was generally restricted to those individuals of privilege and wealth. During the 1700s, reading was taught through primers containing fragments of scripture or literary works. This practice was well established by the time Noah Webster's 1790 spelling books appeared. Even though the books were intended to standardize American spelling, they began to be used as texts for teaching reading. From there, primers with controlled vocabulary and graded levels of difficulty emerged with the rationale that they satisfied the requirements of multigrade classrooms. Soon, graded spellers accompanied these books and further linked reading, spelling, and the pronunciation of words. It also

established the concept of grade level standards.

Early in the 1900s, educational publishers began offering books based on this early practice of primers and spellers, but added workbooks and teacher support manuals to the package. This limited the need for teacher planning and was an example of what Michael Apple calls the "de-skilling" of teachers where decision-making is taken out of their hands. In this case, the decisions were being made, for the most part, by publishers.[16]

English in the secondary school primarily became the study of what were deemed major literary works. The study of such a canon was thought to be essential for college-bound students and since few students other than those going to college completed high school, this was not thought to be a problem.

The study of writing was separate from reading and literature during the 1800s. Writing texts for high school emphasized rhetoric, grammar and analysis. As with the literature, interpretations of college requirements shaped the curriculum--in this case the emergence of the rigid five paragraph essay.

Writing texts for younger students emphasized penmanship, manuscript form, and elements of grammar and usage. Like high school teaching, there was a perceived need to prepare students for what was coming. In this case, the study of English grammar was a way to prepare for the Latin that grammar students would face in high school. This choice is interesting when one considers that high school was mostly for college-bound students. If earlier grades also were looking ahead to college students, then the real

mandate of public schools becomes evident: they were still focussed on the privileged students heading for post-secondary work. Everyone else was along for the ride.

English became a course created to meet demands that had little to do with developing fluency in one's own language. Rather than being able to explore the opportunities in such study, teachers tried to accommodate their teaching for moments outside the classroom: for when students would take Latin, for when they would (might) go to college, and for learning the expectations of an emerging industrial society. But not, it seemed, for using language to describe themselves and their experiences. English language arts was like the fictive identity, strongly molded by outside forces.

In the late 1930s, talk began about the integration of English skills. Educators suggested that meaningful classroom activities and self-exploration were needed in English teaching. But it took two more decades before a U.S. commission headed by Dora V. Smith popularized the concern for integrating reading, writing, speaking, and listening and established the term "language arts." This term was used only below high school, however. At the higher level, the label remained "English" as a way of pointing out that the subject was a serious study rather than a meaningful, integrated experience.

Despite these discussions, it was not until the 1966 Anglo-American Dartmouth Conference that more determined efforts at change began. This watershed event took place over three intensive weeks of reviewing the English Language Arts curriculum. Recommendations from the conference pointed to the work of James Britton, John Dixon, and James

Moffett among others and called for a growth model of learning that stressed creativity, expressive writing, and response to literature.

Writing, so long diminished beside the teaching of literature, began to strengthen after the Dartmouth Conference. Janet Emig's study of the composing process of twelfth graders appeared in 1971. Work in clarifying the writing process was done by Donald Graves (1975), Mina Shaughnessy (1977), and Donald Murray (1986) among others. Continuing from these developments was the work of Lucy Calkins (1986) and Nancie Atwell's influential book, *In the Middle: Writing, Reading, and Learning with Adolescents* in 1987. Writing in English education became a way for students to learn what "real" writers did, to learn that writing was often an extended, thoughtful process rather than a quick, single attempt, and to learn that their own experiences and thinking were valued. It seemed that English education was discovering its own purpose for being and was creating spaces where students and teachers could be themselves. It was an exciting change rich with potential.

Still, like the fictive identity that teachers struggle with, English is buffeted and shaped by outside demands and decisions even as it tries to find its place in schools and classrooms. Teachers are left asking: how should English be taught? Some rely on using the methods by which they were taught, taking comfort in tradition. Others espouse the newer theories, but only give them surface support while they feature much of the traditional in their program. Still others change their practice regularly, searching for some place of comfort for their teaching. A closer look at how the writing process unfolded in the language arts highlights some of the difficulties in a language arts

classroom.

Embracing the Writing Process

> Each story tells me how to write *it*, but not the one afterwards.
> -Eudora Welty[17]
>
> I type in one place, but I write all over the house.
> -Toni Morrison[18]

One of my strongest memories that first year of teaching secondary English language arts was the influence of other teachers on my choices. I had gone into the classroom pretty much expecting that what I knew about reading and writing I would be able to translate into work at school. But it did not seem that there was much room for my vision. Other teachers showed me the available materials and handed me their unit plans and told me that they "did grammar units" and were now in the midst of trying to decide which spelling books to purchase. They knew how things should be done and there seemed to be no negotiating this view, so I taught plot outlines and grammar sheets and followed stories with questions. The world I had re-entered was uncomfortable and contradictory. Karen,too, remembers those kinds of choices when she started teaching, and how she approached students' work. "I used a marking guide," she says. "I'd red pen the whole thing, correct it on structure, ideas, grammar, and spelling. It was horrible."

In sharing our stories of teaching, we both commented on our first impressions of Sam Robinson's writing text, *Bridges*.[19] It was about the same time that the curriculum for teaching English language arts changed to reflect the research that explicated the writing process and applied it

to schools. Here were some answers to the discomfort we felt at teaching English, we thought. It seemed to open up opportunities for the students and to disperse the "top-down" kind of teaching where the teacher controlled assignments, comments, and grading decisions. "I just kept thinking this is exactly what we needed," Karen says. But it was only a starting point. As she points out, "After once through, I learned to skip over certain things and not follow the step-by-step in the book."

Karen's comment relates to my experience. Although *Bridges* and other books like it began to reveal new opportunities, their dependence on old structures--textbook organization, exercises, questions, assignments--began to feel like the old work in new clothes. It was not having the radical effect for which some of us had hoped.

In a recent analysis of a new writing text, *Writing in Context*[20], I discovered some more examples of how little the teaching of writing really had changed. In this text, there are the politically correct words and ideas connected to the writing process. There is the suggestion that writers work to uncover knowledge and promote self-discovery. It is noted that writers need daily practice and that writing is a recursive, flexible process. All admirable observations. But then the text becomes prescriptive and contradicts flexibility. Worksheets are offered to guide students through their writing and are carefully arranged to keep everyone at the same place by dividing the work into thematic units to match the reading text. For instance, during the mystery unit, a worksheet on characterization offers questions like the following: *John is stuck up. He thinks he is too good for everyone.* Write a short piece about John in which you reveal his arrogance by showing him

talking to someone else.[21] As a writer, I would much rather read a piece of literature with particularly strong characters and have techniques of characterization pointed out to me. Then I want to create my own character.

The text also suggests how one can be a writer. "Writers choose their own subjects," the text says, "and start with the impulse to inform, entertain, and persuade." There was an old echo here that disturbed me, and I dug out a writing text used during the seventies, *Just English 3*. The section on writing for a purpose suggests that one writes "a) to arouse to action, b) to entertain, c) to inform, and d) to convince."[22] It was a familiar message, but I had to wonder how often writers actually think of a purpose and then proceed to write? Purpose is something that generally evolves from the act of writing. William Faulkner describes what happens more frequently in writing:

> With me, a story usually begins with a single idea or memory or mental picture. The writing of the story is simply a matter of working up to that moment, to explain why it happened and what caused it to follow.[23]

In the teacher's guide that accompanies *Writing in Context*, a list of potential roles is established for teachers, in case, I suppose, they are feeling uncertain of what to do. The list suggests a teacher can be an observer, model, reader, planner, and mentor without any idea of how one becomes these things. Like other texts, this book operates from a premise that teachers and students need to be guided and that important decisions be made for them. There is a double message at work that says "writing is an individual act of becoming, and this is what you should become." It is another example of "deskilling." No wonder

many teacher still use grammar worksheets and teach formulas for writing when they get these kinds of messages. I am no longer surprised at the story of the teacher who had his class memorize the steps in the writing process and then tested them on that knowledge.

So, although the new writing texts recognized the need to see writing instruction in a new way, they did not go far enough in helping to effect that change. In Willinsky's discussions of the new literacy, he talks about how "[t]he writing process soon developed into something of a three-stage method, with classes set aside for prewriting activity, for drafting and drafting, and for sharing and editing the work."[24] Donald Graves noted the danger of the innovations becoming the new orthodoxy with such distortions as "compulsory revisions" that take away the lithe resilience of something organic.[25] In spite of all the new ideas about the teaching of writing, the old ways of implementing and presenting curricula were creating rigidity in a fluid process.

About the time when the ideas about teaching the writing process had reached an impasse for me, Nancie Atwell's book, *In the Middle*, appeared. She brought some excitement back into my thinking about writing and reading in the classroom. She talked about her writer's workshop where students made decisions about what they were writing and what their writing processes were. Her teaching was designed to respond to individual needs through mini-lessons and conferences. There was an air of organized, productive, and creative work in the classroom she described. Students could be in all different places at once and it could work. They would make decisions like "real" writers.

Karen and I talked about our initial excitement with Nancie Atwell's book and our plunge into her process. But after trying it for a year, we agreed, we had trouble making it work. I described the difficulty in keeping some structure; how the system seemed to keep collapsing for me. Karen concurs. "And, for the majority of the kids," she says, "they struggled. They just couldn't make any connections. I don't think that they're ready to make those connections." We shared how we worked to bring some structure back into our classroom, to find some kind of balance that would honour the choices we wanted available for students while ensuring something was accomplished. We agreed that teaching is never a static process and that there is no way of balancing.

Re-examining my initial enthusiasm about Nancie Atwell and remembering my disappointment when I couldn't get my class to work like hers, I can see some reasons why this may have been so. These reasons also may explain some of the difficulties other teachers experience in writing classrooms. The first and most obvious reason, of course, is that no one can create Nancie Atwell's classroom except Nancie Atwell. Still, I did make some adjustments for my own style and comfort. To me, there was something more. I think perhaps it was the effect of creating such a classroom environment that affected me. Madeleine Grumet's description of a lover's gaze seems to fit here. In my discomfort at replicating hierarchal structures within my classroom, I saw Nancie Atwell's techniques as a way to disperse power in my classroom. Willinsky describes this effect in Atwell's program rather well. "The power," he says, "which makes this space a classroom rather than a coffee shop is still present but the teacher has found a way to circulate it through all the participants rather than

lord it over them."[26]

In doing this, it seemed to make invisible what I knew was there--the asymmetrical relationship that Grumet describes as being between teacher and student. I was pretending to be a writer like them and trying to respond in similar ways to situations. But I knew I wasn't a writer like them. I was hiding my own needs as a writer, my knowledge about writing, even my way of being a writer in the hopes that they would find themselves becoming writers. My fictive identity was moving even farther from my suppressed self.

Despite what I tried, not much about writing instruction really had changed. It was still writing instruction as it has been for most of the last century as Myron Tuman describes in *Word Perfect,* a book about literacy in the computer age. He points out that most writing instruction is still "texts written by student-authors and responded to by teacher-readers."[27] This message is reiterated in the introduction to *Encountering Student Texts*. The editors point out that

> even if we believe that the locus of interpretation is in the student-author, we certainly are not, at least in practice, admitting it. Don't we, in fact, deconstruct our students' texts, looking for places where meaning breaks down, for holes in logic that cause theses and arguments to fall apart?[28]

Writing is a difficult relationship to negotiate in the classroom. The complexity of this relationship is illustrated by Jim Corder in his essay, "Asking for a Text and Trying to Learn It." He tells us that there are at least six texts in every one a student writes:

> I think there is a text that each wanted to write. I think there is a text that each thought he or she wrote. I think there is a text that each did write and turn in. That's three, but not all. There is the text we hoped they would write (ours). There is the text we hoped they would write (theirs). There is the text we try to read. That's six, and no doubt there are other permutations.[29]

It is clear to me that teaching writing in the classroom is a tricky and difficult proposition. It is not like being a solitary writer in a study. It is not accomplished by taking steps in a process and trying to apply them. Neither is it achieved by denying the power structures in a classroom. So is there any use in teaching writing at all?

Looking Again: Re(Vision)ing Possibilities

> We need a new way of thinking, a new vocabulary. We have nineteenth-century thinking....We have to change our brains. That is why I'm so for art, because art will give us a new kind of thinking.
>
> -Andrei Voznesenksky[30]

John Willinsky talks about the promising approach of New Literacy for the teaching of writing. New Literacy is a placeholder for him (thus the capital letters) that encompasses a number of segments of English language arts teaching such as Whole Language, Language for Learning, Writing Across the Curriculum, Reader-Response Theory, the Writing Process and so on. He points out that the New Literacy movement has served the personal side of literacy well so far, but that it is time to move beyond the romantic

sense of the private phenomenon of literacy and begin to utilize the connections between the private and public aspects in the classroom. He sees New Literacy finding the means to restructure the nature of work in the classroom by "restructuring it around a new relationship between students and teacher, between students and text, between students and a self that can be written on the page."[31]

Many people in our society do not tend to think of literacy as political. Rather it is thought of as a means of individual exploration and development, a way to form intellectual character and provide upward mobility. Yet, as I explored in the last chapter, literacy is strongly political. The access and dissemination of information, and the ability to use words, has definite links to where the power lies. Thinking of literacy in political terms challenges the conventional forms of classroom life and our conceptions of literacy. Willinsky underlines this potential with these words:

> The New Literacy speaks directly to teachers reasserting control over the work that goes on in the class, even as it attempts to hand a greater part of the locus of meaning over to the student. It represents a taking hold of the curriculum by the teacher at a fundamental level by challenging the meaning of literacy in the classroom as well as the nature of a teacher's work with the students.[32]

By recognizing that literacy is political, we also recognize that it is a social process that can connect community and school, history and biography. The classroom can become a place where the private and the public meet dialogically.

As wonderful as this sounds, it does not describe how a

teacher can figuratively knock down the walls of the institution to work in a way to reassert control, take hold of the curriculum, and establish a social process where literacy becomes a means to empowerment. In later chapters of this study, I want to explore some concrete ways that such literacy could be enacted through writing, but first there are student voices who have something to say about writing classrooms.

Notes

1. Ursula Le Guin, "Where do you get your ideas from?" in *Dancing at the Edge of the World* (New York: Grove Press, 1989), 200.

2. This quote appears at the beginning of Sylvia Ashton-Warner, *Teacher* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1963), 14, but it originates in Ashton-Warner's novel, *Spinster*.

3. Natalie Goldberg, *Long Quiet Highway: Waking up in America* (New York: Bantam Books, 1993), 67-68.

4. Ibid., 58-59.

5. Ibid., 61.

6. This quote from John Donne appears in an essay by Madeleine Grumet, "My Face in Thine Eye, Thine in Mine Appeares: The Look in Parenting and Pedagogy" in *Bitter Milk* (Amherst, MA: The University Press, 1988). This essay discusses how we come to know ourselves in the world through the Other and how this is difficult in the hierarchal structures of schooling. Some teachers, in an attempt to mitigate this difficulty, opt for a mutuality such as described by John Donne in this line. As I note later, this mutuality has its dangers.

7. Deborah Britzman, *Practice Makes Practice* (New York: SUNY Press, 1991), 4.

8. Ibid., 8.

9. Madeleine Grumet, 96.

10. Ibid., 115.

11. Dennis Sumara, *Fictives and Teacher Identity: On the Importance of Unmasking* (Paper presented at the JCT Conference on Curriculum Theory and Classroom Practice, Dayton, Ohio, October 1993.)

12. John Willinsky, *The New Literacy: Redefining Reading and Writing in the Schools* (Great Britain: Routledge, 1990), 226.

13. Donald Murray, *A Writer Teaches Writing* (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1968).

14. Cited in Tom Romano, *Clearing the Way* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann Books, 1987), 163.

15. Much of the information comes from James R. Squire's excellent overview, "The History of the Profession" and John Dixon's "Historical Considerations: An International Perspective," in *Handbook of Research on Teaching the English Language Arts*, eds. James Flood, Julie M. Jensen, Diane Lapp and James R. Squire (New York: MacMillan, 1991).

16. This term appeared in Michael Apple's introduction to John Willinsky *The New Literacy: Redefining Reading and Writing in the Schools* (Great Britain: Routledge,1990). For more information on Michael Apple's thinking about deskilling, see Michael W. Apple, *Ideology and Curriculum*, rev. ed. (New York: Routledge, 1990).

17. Cited in Jon Winokur, ed. *Writers on Writing* (Philadelphia, PA: Running Press, 1990), 248.

18. Cited in Jon Winokur, ed., 249.

19. Sam Robinson, *Bridges 1* (Scarborough, ON: Prentice-Hall Canada, 1985.

20. Dennis Strauss, ed., *Writing in Context* (Scarborough, ON: Prentice-Hall Canada, 1989).

21. Dennis Strauss, ed., 50.

22. Merron Chorny, M.A. Kostek, M.A. and P.E.Weston, P.E., *Just English 3* (Canada: J.M. Dent & Sons, 1968), 73.

23. Cited in Jon Winokur, ed., 34.

24. John Willinsky, 38.

25. Ibid., 39.

26. Ibid., 52.

27. Myron Tuman, *Word Perfect* (Pennsylvania: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1992), 88.

28. B. Lawson, S. Ryan, and W.R. Winterowd, eds., *Encountering Student Texts* (Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English, 1989), xv.

29. Ibid., 92.

30. Cited in Susan Shaughnessy, *Walking on Alligators* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1993), 62.

31. John Willinsky, 27.

32. Ibid.,18.

CHAPTER THREE

"IF THERE WERE NO UNCLES ON VANCOUVER ISLAND": THE WRITING LANDSCAPE

Children never get to the point,
They surround it.
The importance of the point
Is the landscape of it.
You begin by discussing
"The Rainfall of Vancouver Island"
And somebody has an uncle who lives
there.
And there is an uncle in Alberta
Who has a zillion cows,
Some chickens and a horse
(We get to feed the chickens
And ride the horse),
Which brings us to an uncle
In Saskatchewan, who has a house where
Deer pass the kitchen window
Every morning (He takes us out
And shows us where they go).
If there were no uncles on Vancouver
Island
It would never rain there.

-Barry Stevens, "Grade Five Geography Lesson"[1]

Waiting for Rain

Barry Stevens' poem reminds me of so many events: classes where my students and I just talked, walks with my children when they were small, telephone conversations with nieces and nephews, and nearly every time I write. It also reminds me of the interviews with students for this study. As adults, we often are in too big a hurry to arrive somewhere. We forget that it's the getting there that's good like waiting for Christmas, driving in the spring when leaves are newly green, or writing a novel with characters talking in your head. Speaking with the students was this

kind of journey. When I retrace the dialogue map of our travels, a landscape unfolds and a story is told by individuals who had inhabited a world created through texts. And while the stories from that landscape differ like the stories of two travellers who stop at a site (What a beautiful waterfall! The river'd be great for flyfishing.), it was the experience of dwelling in that world that connected us like the memory of uncles in the poem.

I interviewed each of the six students at the beginning of the study and three months later at the end. In between, I met with them three times as a group. As we explored the writing landscape, we talked about writing in school and at home. We discussed the writing process and the evaluation of writing. We talked about their relationships with teachers, writers, and each other. Through our conversations, it became clear that although they all understood the experience of creating a world through writing, there were many things about schools that impinged upon that process and made it difficult for them.

I chose the students for the group after a discussion with their teacher, Karen, and after reading their writing surveys and samples. All twenty-five grade seven students had sorted through their writing portfolios and selected what they felt was their best work. I then asked them to attach a short note telling me why they had chosen this piece.

That evening I sat down with a pile of surveys and pieces of writing. My intention was to choose six students who were interested in writing, no matter what their ability. I wanted students who were willing to talk about how they felt about writing and who saw themselves as

writers. I wasn't sure just how I would identify these characteristics, but as I began to read, I spotted phrases and attitudes that reflected just what I was looking for. One boy noted in his survey, "To write well a person must open his mind to all possibilities no matter how stupid. Because you never know when the worst ideas might work." Here was someone who could take risks in his writing and knew there could be a payoff. A girl wrote, "[this story] is the best so far because it's touching, has a good plot, [and] sort of keeps you wondering what's happening next...". She could pinpoint the characteristics of a story that made it enjoyable for a reader.

These were students whose voices spoke to the writer in me, who twigged a sense of recognition and common understanding. In the end it was not difficult to choose the three girls and three boys who would make up the discussion group.

Views of the Writing Landscape

> [Writing] is simply a way of life before all other ways, a way to observe the world and to move through life, among human beings, and to record it all... and to shape it, to give it sense, and to express something of myself in it.
>
> -William Goyen[2]

Call together any group of writers and ask them why they write, how they write and what they need to write and you will discover a diversity of opinions. Here's what a meeting of famous writers might sound like[3]:

Jorge Luis Borges: I never reread what I've written. I'm far too afraid I'll feel ashamed of what I've done.

Ernest Hemingway: The first draft of anything is shit.

Katherine Anne Porter: I always write a story in one sitting.

Marianne Moore: If I get a promising idea I set it down, and it stays there. I don't make myself do anything with it.

Morley Callaghan: There is only one trait that marks the writer. He is always watching. It's a kind of trick of mind and he is born with it.

Anaïs Nin: The role of the writer is not to say what we can all say, but what we are unable to say.

Joan Didion: Writers are always selling somebody out.

Tom Wolfe: Writers shouldn't propound their own theories. They do what painters do: Get their wives, husbands, or old school chums to write the manifestoes.

You get the idea as we close the door on this party. In our fascination, we collect and publish the pithy statements that reflect the uniqueness of a writer's vision. Teachers wanting their students to write like "real" writers adopt a process or writing workshop approach in the hope that this replicates the kind of writing conditions that foster such diversity. Not only are students taught the writing process, but classrooms are to become safe places where students write from personal experience, describing what they know and revealing what they feel. Hear Lucy Calkins:

> When our students protest against putting themselves on the page, we need to realize that the protests may not come from laziness. Many young adolescents are ashamed of and humiliated by their writing....Therefore, if we do nothing else, we need to help young people see writing as a safe medium,

> a place for exploration and discovery, and to see the writing classroom as a supportive community.[4]

The students in my research group certainly did reflect diversity and had no difficulty expressing it. However, as the conversations wore on, they revealed that writing in schools was not always safe and supportive and instead of fostering their diversity, often stifled it. Here is their writers' gathering:

"Most of the time," Jane says, "I express myself a lot in my writing. When I write, that's the kind of person I am really." Because Jane does not have much time for writing outside of school, she appreciates the opportunities to do this self-exploration. This setting also allows her to enjoy the social aspect of writing. "I sometimes have five people around my desk waiting to read my story. And I like to make it really exciting so they will want to know what's happening next."

Jordan writes as much at home as she does at school. "I get a lot of writing done every week," she says, "by writing in my journal." She tells her teacher that she prefers writing at home because there are fewer distractions and more time. "I like writing at school," she tells Karen, "but I think I write better at home because I can be there for awhile and then leave it and another day do it again. We should have a lot of time to do these kinds of things because it's a hard process. You've got to be satisfied with it before you hand it in."

She also is keenly aware of the effects of audience. While she does not worry about her writing at home, at school it is sometimes different. When writing a story for

possible publication in the district's literary journal, Jordan thinks about who will read her work.

> I was kind of careful with what I was writing because you know the grade nines always pick on grade sevens. They might tease me about something I've written, so I kept it kind of professional and didn't really show a lot of feelings.

Jafar finds he is easily distracted, and so he thinks he does his best writing at home where it is quiet.

> If you just sit in a corner and write, there is not much in front of you so you can see farsighted kind of. You can see more than you would usually. If I'm writing a Tarzan story, I can see him swinging from one vine to the other to the other and then maybe getting hit by an arrow and just write it all down. I think writing is better if you're in a quiet place.

Even if he thinks he does his best writing at home, Jafar still likes writing in school even though he is very aware of the potential public perceptions of his writing. He talks about his writing for the teacher being more "schooly." By that he means that he would put nothing in his writing that would put him in a negative light, such as having a fight with his brother. He does not want his teachers to see him as "stupid and immature."

"Everything I read," Michael says with enthusiasm, "extends to my writing. I pull in things from my past life and I flip them around a little. I flip around the characters and monsters. I go for it." He describes the influences on the story he has let me read:

> It mixed together a lot of bigger things. It's

> got a lot of movies; it's got a lot of *Deep Space Six*, a horror movie I saw when I was six, and it takes some of *Sea Quest*, a show I watch. And it takes off from my favourite author, Michael Crichton. That's where I got the idea for the big circle, from his book *Sphere*.

His favourite kind of writing is what he calls freewriting. "It all fits into one big line of thought right across my head." He most often writes like this at home. At school, he tells me, he isn't able to be open with teachers. "I've never opened myself fully. It's only when I'm at home that I just let it all out."

Leroy likes writing most of the time, he tells me, except when he has no ideas, but he has strategies to solve that problem:

> Sometimes I read a bunch of other stories. Other times I just look around the house and outside to find ideas. Sometimes I go on a trip. Like on one of the trips I went to Drumheller and did a lot of climbing up Horse Peak Canyon, so I put that in one of my stories.

Leroy also has a strong emotional connection to writing. "When I'm writing a really good story, I start feeling exactly what's happening in the story," he says. But usually he prefers to keep that pleasure to himself, at least so far. In the first interview, he tells me that he doesn't talk about his writing with others. He describes getting lost in the writing of the story, of connecting emotionally to it, and of working in the classroom oblivious to others. That does not mean, however, that he doesn't want people to read his stories. "I usually write these little details one after another to make it longer so they will want to keep reading until finally they get to the really good part where you show the answer."

Gayle tells me that she writes at home when she's bored and when she feels like doing it. "I just find some paper and I write and stick it in a duotang or something," she says. Writing is easier at home because it's quieter, but at school, she gets more ideas. "If you hear people saying they're going to write about this, you can get ideas from that," she notes.

Once she has written a first draft, Gayle almost never looks at it again when she rewrites. "I read it over," she says, "and get more ideas and it gets all mixed up. I just keep the basic idea of what was right and then it becomes an entirely different story." She goes on to add, "It's just neater because you can find a new story rather than editing, fixing, and changing a whole bunch of things. I just don't like to do that."

These six unique writers had definite opinions about how they wrote best and what it meant to write. Some pulled most of their ideas from inside--their feelings directed the kind of writing they did. Others preferred to adapt ideas from stories, movies, and books. I thought back to some of the activities I had had students do in class and wondered how these students might have responded. Had I allowed for the differences among students? Sometimes having the writing process laid out in a series of steps causes us to forget that people do not follow them one after another like a recipe for chocolate cake. What happened many times, I think, is that by presenting an ordered process, students believed that was the way it needed to be followed, no matter what I said about recursiveness. I realize how difficult it is to extend the notion of flexibility in a system that is rigidly structured and which has structured students' lives for years.

Most of the students in the group felt more comfortable writing at home where they wrote what they really wanted. When we ask students to write what they know and how they feel, we are putting them under a spotlight that many of them don't welcome. In an effort to protect themselves, they fake what they are writing; they write "schooly." When we insist that they share their writing with someone, including the teacher, they have the sense of never knowing when they might have to surrender their texts. Yet the sense of accountability and evaluation that permeate the school, makes it difficult for students to not reveal what they write to public view.

We cannot make classrooms places where students will work like writers by adopting an amalgamation of analyses about how writers create, function, and live. Neither will students be convinced that they can write anything they please if we just try to make classrooms warm and cozy places. Choosing to be a writer is something quite different from being required to write in school. No amount of window dressing and soft blanketing will change that fact. But we can perhaps approach writing pedagogy more effectively if we stop thinking only about how to change the physical space in classes and think about the place where writers really work.

Finding a Place: Living in Text

> All bodies carry within themselves
> a project of sensual high technology;
> writing is its hologram.
>
> -Nicole Brossard[5]

A hologram is a photographic record of a light-wave pattern which can later reproduce a realistic three-

dimensional image of the object. When producing a hologram, the beam from a laser is split into two parts, one that reflects off the object to be photographed and one that strikes the photographic plate. When the two beams meet at the plate, a complex pattern is recorded. To reproduce the image, a laser beam is directed through the hologram. One can see different views of the object by looking at the hologram from various directions thus giving the sense of a three-dimensional image. And any part of that hologram that one chooses contains the whole image. William Irwin Thompson describes this holographic principle:

> The necessary opposite to [the] hierarchical principle is the holographic one: every microcosm mirrors the macrocosm; the initiate or genius may exist as a transformer, but Godhead is equally present in all...there is a recursiveness of energy; if the energy is perverted into a simple top-down pyramid, then the system breaks apart in revolution.[6]

Writing follows this holographic principle. The writer's gaze is divided between that place inside where there is "digested experience"[7] to the words on the page outside. The meeting of this experience and the writing create a complex pattern of story. A fictional world is created by the writer even as that world re-creates the writer--what Brossard calls "the fluidity of text seeking its source."[8] As the writer works, she begins to feel herself immersed in this holographic world where her experiences, imagination, and words are forming a matrix. There is the rustle of characters in the closet, the unfolding of a landscape in her study, and the voices of emerging personalities in her head. Some of the markers that connect her to the physical world such as time and place

disappear. She is in "another world." As Brossard tells us

> We exert ourselves to a reality which is transformed. Fiction seeks its own fictional subject and memory alone does not flinch. Memory makes itself plural, essential, like the vertigo that foreshadows an aerial vision.[9]

Wolfgang Iser's description of the reader's relationship with the text continues this holographic metaphor from writer to reader. The text can only come to life, be three-dimensional, when it is studied by the reader. It is the specific, aesthetic structure of literary texts that interacts with the reader, Iser believes, to create a sense of being in another world.

> That is why we often have the feeling, when reading words of past ages, that we are actually transported back into those times and move in historical circumstances as if we belonged to them or as if the past were again present.[10]

The reader is able to recognize many elements from her own experience that are put together in another way; "a familiar world reproduced in an unfamiliar form."[11]

The literary text, Iser explains, is halfway between the external world of objects and reader's experience. The reader is able to create the fictional world in this space because of the indeterminate elements of the prose. These indeterminate elements--what the author does not tell the reader--are a switch for the reader to use her own ideas to "flesh out" the story. Thus Iser explains

> literature simulates life, not in order to portray it, but in order to allow the reader to share in it. He can step out of his own

> world and enter another, where he can experience extremes of pleasure and pain without being involved in any consequences whatsoever.[12]

The students from the research group understood this holographic world through their reading and their writing experiences. Jafar tells me, "I see that I put myself in the story like a character so it feels like I'm actually there." For Leroy, being in the story is one of the main reasons he likes to write. "When I'm writing a really good story," he says, "I start feeling exactly what's happening in the story." Gayle describes that what is fun about writing is that "you can sometimes put yourself in what you're writing." Michael equates the imaginative process of writing to reading.

> When you are flipping through *Jurassic Park* and it says all of a sudden the Tyrannosaurus Rex comes bursting out of the trees and picks up this guy and rips him up, when you see the movie they decide what he looks like. When you read the book, you can say in your head, 'oh man, I betcha it looks like that,' and it's always better. It's more imagination and I do a lot of stuff with imagination.

They also understand that it is the details in their writing that construct this world. Hear their voices:

> Gayle: The words I picked for the story are descriptive. They are the senses. Like the air was crisp and it was a warm night. The moon was shining.
>
> Jafar: I use descriptive words so that it looks like you were there. Detail, detail, and detail. That's what makes a story best.
>
> Jordan: People like descriptive writing because it gives you an idea. You know where you are, you know what they're doing;

you can imagine that.

Jane: Describe the situation really good so they know what's there, can picture it in their mind what you're writing.

Michael: I pull pieces from all over and use my imagination, then I switch roles and become a reader. If I see too much blood and gore and ripping arms off, I might slow down.

Leroy: Like when I started writing this story, I had a whole bunch of ideas in my head. I was actually in the story while I was writing like I was one of the characters.

All six knew what they needed to do to create a world through story. They also recognized that it was the pleasure of this that drew them to writing, but achieving such a creation was often difficult and fraught with frustration for them because they felt constrained by the demands of school.

The students spoke often about needing to have choice with their topics and with their process. They realized that if they did not have some connection to the topic, they could not write well. Gayle notes, "There's no point in getting the topic picked for you. Maybe you're not good at writing the topic given." Michael in referring to an experience in his younger grades says, "Every story we wrote for him he gave us all the topics of the stories. And it just screwed me up completely. I ended up with one-and-a-half page stories. Without topics, I can get six, seven pages. Just give us a choice," he recommends when his teacher asks what changes could be made to writing in school.

These comments did not mean that the students wanted a teacher to come into the room and tell them to write whatever they wanted. This could leave them lost and just as frustrated. What they needed from the teacher was a place to begin where they could be grounded such as a general topic or a way of looking at the world differently. Jordan tells me, "It's hard to think up something on your own. You need something to refer to. Like a general word or something."

They had similar feelings about the writing process. They wanted the opportunity to explore their fictional worlds without being given a road map. Some of the students didn't want any guidance for the writing process while others appreciated suggestions in the way an adventuresome traveller would welcome an occasional road sign. They just did not want the route predetermined. Michael describes his frustration with a prewriting exercise:

> Point this, point that. Sit here and write and answer these questions. For a week we're doing this and I had the story in my head for the entire week.

Although Leroy likes some structure such as being assigned a writing task, he likes freedom to follow his own writing process:

> I don't like prewriting. I just like putting my ideas down. The first thing I think of in a story is usually the climax. It's hard for me to think of a beginning. But I like to choose how I will write.

Jafar, too, prefers to choose his own way of working through the writing process. "I think we should have an option," he says, "because what I do is if I find a topic really easy, I

wouldn't do the prewriting, I'd just go ahead and do it." Jane likes to use point form and mindmaps, but she admits that "sometimes if I get stuck, the questions from prewriting help."

There are times in our discussions when it seems the whole idea of writing as a process of steps just confuses everything. When someone suggests using pictures as a way of prewriting, Jafar asks, "Why is it called prewriting if you're not writing?" I explain that "pre" means "before." So prewriting is before writing. Then he says, "So how can you write when you're prewriting?" I have to admit that that's a good question. Prewriting does suggest that there is a line to be crossed. I don't know where the line is. The only line I can be sure of is the stretch of words appearing on my page, but I would hesitate to think of what came before that as prewriting. My writing begins in so many places from so many times that there is often no tracing it. Like Michael, I pull in things from all over.

When talking about assigned work in school, the students reveal that sometimes the reasons for doing work are confusing to them. When Karen hands out a form to help guide their portfolio choices, she emphasizes that answering the questions will help them think about why they are making decisions and that it is not something for her to mark. She asks them to consider why they selected the piece of writing, what its special strengths were, and what was especially important to them during the process of writing the piece. Yet later in our group, when we talk about the form, the students understand its purposes differently. They wonder why they had to fill out all the questions. [They didn't.] They also don't think the form is a tool for their use. Michael says, "I figure the reason she gave this

to us is for more of a information sheet for her. Just to see our views on writing and what we think about this certain thing." Karen's thinking about how the form would be used and my understanding of her plan were not at all what the students were understanding. I thought again about some of the assumptions I had made about what students understood and about what I said in class. I realized that sometimes there was a wider gap than I thought.

The six students also were definite about how they wanted their writing read by a teacher. They often felt that teachers' comments were fragmented and focussed on unimportant details instead of giving an overall reader's response. They wanted an audience as well as an evaluator, and they wanted that evaluator to recognize the landscape of their story. Hear pieces of their conversation:

Jane: I would, if I were the teacher, ask the kids what they would write about. Then I'd get them to write a story about anything they wanted and then see how they write. From that first story I would see how they expressed themselves and what they liked to write.

Jordan: I would look at the effort they put into it. Look at the effort to make good content.

Leroy: They may not be a good writer as long as they have good confidence and put a lot of effort into it. That's great because the more effort they give, the more practice they have and the better they get.

Michael: If little Joe came in with a page but it was his best possible effort, I'd give him a decent mark. Not tear it up for one small thing like his handwriting or spelling. It could be a Nobel prize winner for all the

teacher knows.

Gayle: Creativity. If it's different and not boring.

Jordan: Marks for stories that may not always get their point across but put in other things so you can put yourself in that setting.

The students also saw another important role for the teacher. They wanted feedback about their finished writing, but they also wanted encouragement during the writing. They even equated it to the kind of encouragement they might receive from home. It was valued and sought after. Listen to another excerpt:

Jafar: The teacher or parents or whoever is teaching you at that point should go 'that is a nice try and try again." Not, 'oh you stupid person. Don't you know how to do that?'

Leroy: It comes a lot from home like Jafar said. It usually depends on how supportive your parents are, and if at school the teacher is supportive that's good because what kids need to help them write is self-confidence. If they don't have self-confidence then they think they're a lousy writer and they never write again.

Michael: Some kids are born writing and others aren't. It takes time for them. Three years, six years, whatever, before they become good writers. Self-confidence is important. If your teachers are bombing your work, then you're not going to have a writing ability.

Jordan: The teacher has to help you along. If you don't understand things, they need to give you different ways of learning them and take the time to stop and explain.

Jane: When they know you've done something and they appreciate what you've done. That's important.

Jafar: [Teachers]have got to put [students] toward the spirit of writing.

The spirit of writing. The students wanted to feel that the teacher understood that spirit. Had she or he ever done the assignments that they now gave out? They wanted to see how teachers write. As Jane says, "We want to know how she expresses her writing. I think that everything she sees in us, we want to see in her." They thought that teachers could not just talk about writing; they wanted to sense teachers' aura of experience; they were curious about an adult writing. And not just any adult, but their teacher. There was no implication in their discussion that teachers should become writers like them, but rather that they should create their own holograms. That way, the students would know teachers understood what it was like to traverse the landscape instead of just showing "slides" of former journeys. They would know that teachers understood about uncles who lived in Vancouver, Alberta, and Saskatchewan.

The question remains, however: In the life of a classroom is it possible for teachers to become travellers and tour guides with their students? Can they enter the holographic world with students to point out the sights?

Notes

1. Barry Stevens, "Grade Five Geography Lesson," in *Going for Coffee*, ed. Tom Wayman (B.C.: Harbour Publishing, 1981), 140-141. Permission graciously given from Mrs. Pat Stevens.

2. Cited in Jack Hodgins, *A Passion for Narrative* (Toronto, ON: McClelland & Stewart, 1993), 30.

3. All quotes are from Jon Winokur, ed.,*Writers on Writing* (Philadelphia, PA: Running Press, 1990).

4. Lucy Calkins, *The Art of Teaching Writing* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann Educational Books, 1986), 106.

5. Nicole Brossard, *The Aerial Letter*, trans., Marlene Wildeman (Toronto, ON: The Women's Press, 1988), 68.

6. William Irwin Thompson, ed.,"Introduction," in *Gaia: A Way of Knowing* (Hudson, New York: Lindisfarne Press, 1987), 28.

7. This is Natalie Goldberg's term from *Wild Mind*. See chapter one for a further explanation of this.

8. Nicole Brossard, 68.

9. Ibid., 67.

10. Wolfgang Iser, *Prospecting: From Reader Response to Literary Anthropology* (Baltimore, MD: The John Hopkins University Press, 1989), 5.

11. Ibid., 7.

12. Ibid., 29.

CHAPTER FOUR

PORTFOLIOS: GATHERING, MEETING, UNFOLDING

> Any story told twice is a fiction.
>
> -Grace Paley[1]

> The only thing that makes life possible is permanent, intolerable uncertainty: not knowing what comes next.
>
> -Ursula K. Le Guin[2]

Pieces from a Portfolio

no boundaries no beginning no end one continual shove of growing edge of land meeting edge of water with ribbon of sand while sea and forests calm and still virgin soil clean sea pure air vastness by day still deeper vastness in dark when beginnings and endings joined no boundaries no beginning no end one

***

Taking Flight

When Edwin brought us here
I was sorry
I wished
to go somewhere
instead of staying home

I watched him huff and complain
at Rowe while they pounded
board on board
pile after pile until
they had shaped some sort
of demented prairie shack
supported by a bare knoll

I sang to the wind
when I couldn't find
another woman
to spend my days
I scrubbed clothes
in a leaky wooden tub
and cried at night
while Edwin snored in my ear

But one day
I walked to the top
of the rim
Screamed at the sky
threw stones at hawks
circling above their prey
and howled like a madwoman
locked away for years and
suddenly tossed into the world

Afterwards
I laughed at Edwin's
clumsy pioneer attempts
Flung dust from my house
with a feather
Cleaned dirt floors
with a willow branch

and
I could fly above the rim
circling and swooping

***

Moses' rod turned into a serpent. Fine trick that. I know many men who already think they can do such things with their rods and worse. The irony, for me, is that the serpent belongs to women. It is a symbol of our ancient wisdom and healing. My great-grandmother was a doctor--not someone trained--but one who travelled about the community dispensing both herbs and healing wisdom. She would have wrapped a serpent about her wrist and patted it on the head, listening to its words to discover healing. I had a dream once of a serpent coiling and uncoiling in my abdomen until it sprang forth. I awoke sweaty and frightened. I threw back the covers, searched my bed, traced the caesarian scar on my abdomen, but nothing had changed. Still when I lay back, I could feel the coiling, hear the hiss. Later, a wise woman held my hand and told me that it was my inner wisdom waking up; that the snake was to be embraced, not feared. Her fingertips lowered my eyes and she spoke to my

snake until it grew warm within me and I felt a blossoming inside. The snake moved through my veins, nudging my limbs, tickling my throat, and when I spoke again, it was without fear.

***

These are three pieces from my portfolio and already the writer in me is saying, "Leave it at that. Let the reader guess why they might be here. Let her or him make those connections." But this study is not entirely a piece of fiction, and there is a more practical reason for their inclusion. I want to talk first about why I felt I had to cull through my portfolio and make selections for this chapter, and second, why I chose the three pieces that I did.

I need to begin by saying that I don't really have a portfolio. At least not in the sense of a folder sitting on my shelf where I carefully file samples that illustrate my process and my better final products. In fact, I don't think I know any writers who do have such a thing. I never really have a portfolio until I need to choose pieces of writing for a particular purpose and then the gathering and sorting begins. Here are some recent examples of my portfolio building.

I was asked to present a writing workshop to junior high students at a young writers' conference in January. For that, I needed samples of my own writing process to illustrate the kinds of activities I was asking them to do. For the section about dream harvesting, I went to my dream log and found one that I had used as a basis for a character in my novel. Another section of my talk was focussing on how to use newspaper stories for writing, so I went to my leather zipper binder to find the news clipping that formed

a pivotal scene in a short story which was on file in my computer under "short stories." Finally, I took along my copy of *The English Patient*, written in and filled with sticky markers so students could see how integral reading was to my writing. That was my portfolio for that day.

Another day several months ago, I was asked to prepare a selection of readings for a local event at a coffee shop. The afternoon would feature a number of women reading pieces about men. At first I thought, "I never write much about men," but then I began to search my computer files and the file folders in the cabinet by my desk. I realized I did write about men, perhaps as much about their absence as their presence. In most of my pieces there was at least a male shadow. I found a scene between a father and daughter in a short story and picked several poems from my Emily Carr series which had strong images of sexuality and birth. Then I arranged the pieces in a folder in the order I thought I would likely read them. Another portfolio.

And now this portfolio. Only by spilling the process onto these pages did I feel I could illustrate my thinking. My choices for this chapter had two impetuses. First, I wanted to choose pieces of which I was proud and which readers might want to read. Second, they were pieces chosen from different places for different reasons to show the diversity possible in even a small portfolio.

The first poem was pulled from the computer file of my Emily Carr collection. Like so much of my writing during my exploration of Emily Carr, this was a piece influenced by her journals. By playing with her description of Uclulet, I felt that I conveyed the sense of rhythm she saw in the world and strove for in her painting. This poem was written

quite quickly, the rhythms seeming to come from my fingers as much as from the language.

The second poem was written over ten years ago as part of a collection created during a poetry writing class. Our assignment was to collect old family pictures to use as inspiration. The pictures I gathered went back three generations and their discovery included an afternoon of me taping my father's stories. This past Christmas, when I resurrected the collection from my dusty files and presented it to my parents, my father was particularly delighted. The poem in this chapter about my great-grandmother is one of the best of the group I think because I managed to evoke some of the magical sense of the process of thinking back generations. It seems to me that such thinking stirs some genetic memory and revitalizes links that are otherwise buried. As well, the image of the madwoman fascinates me and is one that reappears in my work. Of course, the pleasure of my audience--my parents, sisters, and anyone who walks through my parents' door--deepens my attachment to these poems.

The last piece was a written response from my journal. I attended a one-night writing workshop in December where this writing emerged. The night was mystical. Twenty-five women gathered into a small historical room near the university. We began by going around the group and calling out the names of our grandmothers to invite their presence into the room. Then we listened to excerpts of powerful imagery followed by writing (no stopping allowed). The entire evening was a process of listening-writing-reading-listening-writing-reading while our grandmothers' spirits hovered above us. As I wrote the excerpt, it felt like the words were humming out of my body, that I was a conduit for

some powerful centre deep within me; it was a spiritual experience. I think much of that power remains in the piece.

So this portfolio represents three very different writing experiences from three different times and places. Each one I wanted to share with readers, not only so they would have three different reading experiences, but also so I could explain my process in a more concrete way. Just as with my two other portfolios, I had a very particular purpose that sent me gathering work, making certain arrangements and juxtapositions for illustration, and then letting meaning unfold from what I had put together. This process is different, it seems to me, than the way portfolios are usually used in schools. A certain rigidity, an orthodoxy of portfolios has developed in the few years since they appeared that threatens to stifle their potential and leave them to become just another fad that floated through the school system.

Tools of Assessment

> "And how many hours a day did you do lessons?" said Alice, in a hurry to change the subject.
> "Ten hours the first day," said the Mock Turtle: "nine the next, and so on."
> "What a curious plan!" exclaimed Alice.
> "That's the reason they're called lessons," the Gryphon remarked: "because they lessen from day to day."
>
> -*Alice in Wonderland*[3]

Like the characters in *Alice in Wonderland*, educators look for ways to teach differently and more effectively, but, as Lewis Carroll's clever word play shows, working

differently within the same structure is effective only to a point and then the benefits lessen from day to day. This seems to be the fate of portfolios in school.

In *Portfolio Profiles*, Donald Graves worries about the trend of mandating portfolios as evaluation instruments. Although they have been popular in schools for just over five years, he notes, their purposes are becoming restrictive. This practice misses the potential of portfolios Graves suggests. He says

> Early data that show their use as a medium for instruction is more than promising. We need to explore the many uses of portfolios for at least another five years, and perhaps indefinitely. Without careful exploration, portfolio use is doomed to failure. They will be too quickly tried, found wanting, and just as quickly abandoned.[4]

In the same collection of essays, Dan Seger surveys the educational landscape that portfolios entered. Classroom instruction was becoming more collaborative than individualized during the 1980s, he notes, and teachers were beginning to see literacy as an emerging process rather than a discrete set of skills. At the same time, the public was beginning to attack the quality of education, particularly literacy skills. In that kind of environment, portfolios evolved and then quickly became attached to assessment until "the 'assessment' concept...nearly pre-empted other ideas about the purpose or potential of portfolios."[5]

When reading much of the published work about portfolios, this assessment bias predominates. Despite the themes that emerge in the articles such as student involvement, ownership and metacognitive benefit, the

consistent use of terms like versatility, comprehensiveness, accountability and authenticity mean the bottom line of most portfolio projects is assessment. A quick survey of some of the research illustrates this point.

Roberta Camp[6] points out that portfolios challenge traditional measurement paradigms. They raise questions about standardization, efficiency, reliability, validity and generalizability[7] and are criticized on the grounds that these aspects are compromised. The opposition, Camp believes, comes from a public that has been conditioned to expect numerical representations of student achievement. Instead, she points out that portfolios are able to accommodate a "complex view of learning, to live up to a highly professional standard of pedagogical responsibility, and to inform the various audiences responsible for student learning in an enlarged definition of accountability."[8] Valencia[9] reiterates this point that learning is too complex and assessment too imperfect to rely on a single score. Portfolios, although seemingly simple and straightforward, can reflect and assess this complexity of learning. Yancey describes this paradox in the following way:

> On the one hand, they are quite simple: a mere pedagogical tool with assessment capability. On the other hand, writing portfolios promise to change significantly what goes on in writing classrooms--because of the messages they send, the authority they assign, the ways they motivate students, and the insights they challenge students to perceive and articulate. As important, these mere collections, or folders, can emphasize and extend in new ways other processes, particularly when it comes time to respond to and evaluate students' work.[10]

While Valencia, McGinley, & Pearson support this grassroots approach to assessment, they emphasize that it

must not be laissez-faire nor structureless. They have conceptualized a continuum metaphor by which the "grassroots" can classify their own assessment approaches. The five continua (focus, structure, mode, locus of control, and intrusiveness) encourage teachers to explore the range of possibilities in their assessments while ensuring variety and balance to establish a systematic process.[11]

Threaded through this discussion of assessment, researchers explore the importance of student involvement and ownership in this portfolio process. They often point out that portfolios are a way for students to set goals, track their progress over time, and reflect on their strengths and needs in their writing--all of which are assessment activities.[12]

Closely connected to student ownership is the theme of metacognitive potential. The decision-making process students use for portfolios employs some kind of evaluation scheme that requires them to consider both their writing process and the end result. This will increase the likelihood that they will begin to use past experiences in writing to shape subsequent experiences. Lucas[13] explains that portfolios introduce formative evaluation to students and move it to a new level of importance when they are allowed to develop evaluative acuity. D'Aoust calls this reflection a "self-consciousness about oneself as a writer"[14] while Yancey calls it a "self-reflexiveness of writing."[15] In this paraphrase of Vygotsky, assessment critic E.H. Thompson agrees that students need to develop this ability of self-evaluation:

> Only when students are able to detach themselves from the creative task at hand and view their efforts objectively are they in a position to

> achieve mastery over any cognitive task they are engaged in. This is especially true of writing. After all, when students write something, someone has to make a judgement about its effectiveness. Why not let this "someone" increasingly become the student?"[16]

Many researchers think that this understanding of the writing process could be the greatest student benefit of portfolio assessment.[17]

The teacher interviewed for this study also saw the portfolio as primarily an evaluation tool. Karen hoped my research would give her the opportunity to have students begin making more assessment decisions about their portfolios, including what they saw as their best writing and analyzing their choices. Besides being an evaluation tool, portfolios served an organizational purpose for her. Karen manages a computer project for several teachers in her school. Portfolios became a way to collect things from students so all the involved teachers could have the students work with the same materials.

Unlike the educators, the students did not consider assessment a critical feature for portfolios. Most of them admitted that it was interesting to look back on their writing, and most were able to talk about a vague sense of improvement, but there were other aspects more important for them. Several students used the portfolio as a source of ideas for new stories and for rewriting old ideas. Like their teacher, they saw it as a great organizational tool. By using the portfolio, they made sure they didn't lose anything they might want to use later. The table of contents that their teacher asked them to include was an important part of this organization and also served as a list of their

accomplishments. Essentially, they saw no difference between the portfolio and what had been called writing folders in their earlier grades. Any evaluative decisions seemed to be based on demands of the moment as well as their feelings. For instance, if they were down, they might pick a sad story. If the teacher had already evaluated the writing, their evaluation of the piece was seen through the teacher's lens, particularly if the teacher had liked it. They seemed to have little conscious sense of what evaluating their work meant. I had to wonder why assessment had such great importance for teachers and so little for students.

Evaluation Emancipation?

> If there is a special hell for writers, it would be in the forced contemplation of their own works.
>
> -John Dos Passos[18]

Why this obsession with assessment and evaluation? In the first place, schools were and are sorting places. They rank and evaluate individuals in various ways to suit the demands of the society that supports the institution. As Madeleine Grumet points out in her essay, "Pedagogy for Patriarchy," education became a way to prepare skilled labour for an increasingly industrialized society. At the same time, teaching was a way to let women out of the home and still keep them under constant surveillance. This feminization of teaching and the common school movement served to strip the family of its authority and deliver the child to the state. Since education's purpose was this training and sorting, evaluation became a crucial element in the process.

This evaluation usually took the form of testing. The word test was derived from *testum*, a porous cup for determining the purity of metal by observing how the molten metal travelled through the cup. Later, as the *Oxford English Dictionary* (OED) notes, test meant a proof or sample; anything determined by means of a trial. The result was a shift from performance, where a cup revealed the movement of molten metal, to the requirement that there be some indicator that would prove value.

This same shift occurred in school testing. As the 19th century neared its end, and common schooling was firmly in place, standardized tests were being touted as more efficient than other portfolio-style assessments[19]. This preference was further strengthened and became entrenched during the school efficiency movement between 1911-1916 .[20]

As the impression grew that testing was more scientific and therefore more accurate, a notion evolved that optimal learning occurred when material could be broken down into tasks and components and then be tested as isolated outcomes.[21] For example, the common use of timed writing tests continued to pass on the message that writing was a skill rather than a complex cognitive process which required critical thinking. What was perhaps most harmful about such testing practices was that they reinforced the idea that mere right answers were adequate signs of ability. But a fact memorized and regurgitated is no assurance that this information can be understood and applied. As Strzepek and Figgins note in their review of their own teaching practices, traditional testing and grading stifled their best teaching instincts and retarded the progress of all but the most compulsive students.[22] No wonder teachers often feel uncomfortable about testing practices.

I remember my own experience every June when I found myself in the dilemma of trying to find a way to evaluate my students while still following the mandated two hour exam. Because the results were required by the next morning, an opportunity to explore any ideas in writing was precluded, especially if I had several exams on the same day. Over the years, I increasingly found ways to count earlier work as part of the final grade and for the exam requirement gave the students long stories to read with requests for short responses. This was not a satisfactory solution. I did not feel completely honest and the students knew that this final test was an exercise in futility; still it was something I believed I had to do. The students had to be evaluated and the most valorized method was the final test.

Lorrie Shepard[23]outlined a number of difficulties with a testing culture including the fact that teachers feel less able to determine content when instruction is test-defined. In such a culture, teachers also have students practice on similar test items so that scores improve without a corresponding growth in achievement.[24]

Wiggins, in his critique of testing, lamented that "we have lost sight of the fact that a true test of intellectual ability requires *the performance of exemplary tasks*" and that "a standardized test of intellectual ability is a contradiction in terms."[25] He explains that new ideas can be misunderstood simply by assimilating them into our old conceptions. Therefore, many students who do well on school tests by memorizing ideas seem thoughtless and incompetent when solving real world problems.

It is not surprising then, that when the term "assessment" began to be more widely used, many teachers

eagerly saw it as a way of overcoming some of the difficulties of testing. The origin of the word "assessment" is more gentle than "test." Derived from a Latin root which means to "sit by," it invites the image of an assessor/ teacher being close to whomever she is assessing as she observes and collects data. With such a picture, we can imagine how the possibilities for what is seen, heard, and understood broaden in comparison to a test. Teachers can use checklists, surveys, anecdotal records, student portfolios and journals, videos, laser disks, among many other choices for assessment purposes.[26]

Assessment also seems to be another way for teachers to disassociate themselves from the surveyor/surveyed role described in chapter two. When a test is administered, it is clear who is in control of the situation. The teacher creates or finds the test, distributes it, watches the writing of it to ensure that each individual attends only to her or his paper, and then gathers the tests for evaluation. An assessment implies that the evaluation done is of the work an individual has created; work that likely begins within the student and then is presented to the teacher. The teacher feels less like an arbiter and judge and more like a helpful companion, a nurturer.

Students, however, still know that the teacher makes the ultimate judgement. During this study, when the students filled out forms asking them to tell why they had chosen a particular piece of writing, they believed they were filling it out for the teacher instead of for their own understanding. Gayle was clearly unhappy being asked to fill out the form. "What does this really have to do with your story? Well you read it and tell me. [Speaking as if to her teacher.] What do you think about it? If the teacher

wants us just to say what we think about it; well she already knows what we think about it. We filled out about 80 other forms about writing."

Students know that the teacher's gaze can be forever on their work. There is a sense that it is only what they do that matters, not who they are or what they think. In *Writing, Schooling, and Deconstruction*, Pam Gilbert discusses her study of five students describing school writing. The most successful student, Gilbert notes, was one who understood what was required for writing at school; she could differentiate the school's writing categories and fulfill the request for personal voice. Another student described how she worked to improve her evaluation.

> I tried really hard to make it more personalized and I rigged the whole thing to make it look really personal, whereas all the other ones (that is, the year before) I hadn't and I had been given really low marks...[27]

The teacher's response to this girl's assignment had been to remark on her understanding of the personal voice.

> You obviously understand personal voice. This comes through well in your journal. I really get the impression I'm sharing the book with you. Your conclusion is perceptive.[28]

It seems that no matter what teachers do, they cannot escape the fact that it is they who must make the ultimate judgement, that it is they who are held accountable. Is there a way out of this evaluation dilemma? Is the difficulty with the teachers? With the students? With writing? I think perhaps the difficulty lies in trying to teach writing in an institution like a school. I am

reminded of Foucault's description of the Panopticon as an architectural design which has at its centre a tower with wide windows that open into a peripheric building. This building is divided into cells which extend the width of the building. Each cell has two windows--one that opens to the outside to allow light to cross the cell and another which opens toward the tower. All that is needed, Foucault says, is for a supervisor to be in the central tower observing the madman, patient, worker, or schoolboy highlighted in the light from the window. This arrangement has the effect of inducing in the actor a state of conscious and permanent visibility without him ever knowing for sure if he [or she] is being watched. In the tower one can see everything without ever being seen. "Among schoolchildren," Foucault writes, "it makes it possible to observe performances (without there being any imitation or copying), to map aptitudes, to assess characters, to draw up rigourous classifications, and in relation to normal development, to distinguish 'laziness and stubbornness' from 'incurable imbecility...'."[29] Such an arrangement establishes "hierarchical surveillance, continuous registration, perpetual assessment and classification."[30] The panopticon has the potential not only for constant inspection by appointed inspectors, but also for irregular inspections by the public who may see how schools, hospitals, factories, or prisons function.

Even as teachers are watchers and evaluators of students, there are those in the "tower" who watch and evaluate them. The pressure for accountability, for performance grows. The cry for standardized assessments multiplies. In an effort to break the strength of that panoptic gaze, teachers try to divide up the power in the classroom through peer writing groups and portfolio

assessments, but the eye is still there, watching, sometimes/always watching. In such a climate, whatever can be hidden is--the teacher does not talk of her life outside the classroom, the students write "schooly" pieces--and what is shared is only what they can bear to reveal.

Thinking of schools in this way feels gloomy and hopeless. How can one work within such an institution? I think the answer begins in the image of the cell. As long as we are isolated from one another--class from class, teacher from teacher--there is the possibility that divide and conquer will work. Instead we need to begin finding ways to bring down the walls of the institution, to begin to cross boundaries in spite of the watcher so those in the tower will not be sure where to look for us next. In some small ways, perhaps, portfolios can begin this process of breaking down cell walls and ending the isolation.

Dwelling in Portfolios

> The youth gets together his materials to build a bridge to the moon or perchance a palace or temple on earth.
>
> -Thoreau[31]

When I used portfolios in my writing classroom, the experience that resonates for me were the moments I spent speaking to students about their portfolios. After having students choose pieces of writing throughout one term, I met with them individually for five minutes or so to talk about what they had chosen, to ask them what had been learned about their writing that term, and to ask what aspects of their writing I could help them with.

Our discussions were most interesting. I learned more about my students in those five minute chats than I had all year long. They came to speak about work they had chosen, they knew I was not evaluating this process, and they understood that I wanted to hear what they had to say. Their insights and enthusiasm were surprising to me. Afterwards, I tried to discover what it was that had worked so well. In the past, I had interviewed students, had them fill out questionnaires and had spoken to them about their answers, but this time was different. It seemed to me that the differences lay in the fact that they had chosen what they would bring to our discussion, they knew the topics for our talk were broad, and they knew they were telling rather than having me ask. For me, there seemed to be some important lessons here, but it was not until I read a piece by Heidegger that the lessons became concrete.

In his essay, "Building Dwelling Thinking," Heidegger makes a clear distinction between our common understanding of the words "build" and "dwell" and their origins. *Bauen*, to build, originates in the old High German word *buan*, which means to dwell. *Bauen* is also another form of *ich bin* and *du bist*--I am and you are. So dwelling, *bauen*, really is the essence of being on earth. I am. You are.

Thus "build" comes to mean more than to preserve and protect something. "We do not dwell because we have built, but we build and have built because we dwell, that is, because we are *dwellers*." [32] In building, Heidegger tells us, we gather and preserve the fourfold--earth and sky, divinities and mortals--and in doing so create dwelling spaces. He describes the building of a bridge as a way of illustrating what he means. A bridge gathers the earth around the stream, he says. It does not just connect two

banks that are already there. Instead the "bridge *gathers* to itself in *its own* way earth and sky, divinities and mortals."[33] The bridge creates a site, a location for this gathering. This creates a space which Heidegger defines as something that has been made room for within a boundary. And boundaries, he points out, are not where something stops, but where something begins its essential unfolding.

Like the bridge, portfolios can become locations for gathering, spaces where things can be in their essence and unfolding begins. But with this building, we must remember the "I am, you are." I, as builder of the portfolio, must make the decisions. Only I can gather pieces for that moment. No one else knows all the choices available to me. As the students in this study talked about their portfolios, I saw that they thought of their portfolios as ever expanding compilators of work. They knew they could look back, and that it organized them, but beyond that, there was no sense of building and little opportunity to find meaning in the building. Instead, as I do with my writing, if students could keep their work in files, on computer disks, and in scribblers--anywhere where they could access it--and then build portfolios from that source while thinking about particular purposes, I think they would be more successful.

The portfolio could then become a location where space is created for meaningful unfolding to begin. Who I am as a writer for this particular purpose at this particular moment makes the building and the thinking attainable. I am not putting all my cards on the table, my entire self as a writer is not being evaluated, all is not exposed for scrutiny. It helps to diminish the sense that everything I do is being seen always through the panoptic view. Instead, I am preparing a small snapshot of myself as a writer for

this time only. This process would help students move away from the vague and amorphous thinking about who they are as writers, what their writing abilities are, and where they are on the writing journey. Such thinking is complex and analytical, and I must confess that in all my years of writing I have never indulged much in it. Students could create portfolios specifically for the teacher to mark some pieces for a term, another could be built to show parents some writing, another made to present a reading to peers and another for an interview with the teacher. Portfolios would create particular spaces and unfoldings and this focus would give students the opportunity to think more clearly about their writing.

Such thinking about portfolios could have some interesting implications for teachers too. Karen's work shows the potential for how this might work. She describes her computer room portfolio project:

> We started using them for us as teachers initially as organization, so when students came from their language arts classroom into the computer room, they had a place to deposit their work--rough or good or whatever--rather than tracking it back and forth. At first, the portfolio stayed in a filing cabinet in the computer classroom and we just put in copies. Now it's grown and each teacher is doing a different thing. The math people started taking people into the computer room and using the portfolios for their math projects. It has been a kind of central focus for teachers. That's been the thing to get it going. When we're all in separate little classrooms, I don't think there was a necessity for anything like that.

She talks about focus--again portfolios become a location. In this instance, the students' work is an opportunity for teachers to see and understand what each is

doing so duplication is avoided and programs can be planned. There is potential for team teaching and planning. It is also a way to begin to break down the cell walls, to divert the gaze of the panopticon. I am not sure how the students in this project viewed these portfolios, but I expect that if they knew the teachers were using them to track classroom activities and their progress, the students would make choices according to what the teachers asked. The important point is, however, that it needs to be clear who is creating this portfolio and what the purpose is. In this case, it is the teachers' portfolio because they are making the choices about what is to be included to show classroom activity. These portfolios then become a location, a point of communication for teachers and from that communication they can understand what their colleagues are doing, see the broader picture of their classroom work and their students, and be encouraged through this information to enact change where it is needed. It is this potential for dialogue where perhaps the greatest potential of portfolios lies.

Meeting, Talking, Inventing

> Because we are engaged in a day-by-day process of self-invention--not discovery, for what we search for does not exist until we find it--both the past and the future are raw material, shaped and reshaped by each individual.
>
> -Mary Catherine Bateson[34]

As I listened to the tapes of Karen interviewing her students about portfolios, I noticed something happened in every interview. At the beginning of each, the students' replies to Karen's questions were short and stiff. It seemed that they were thinking carefully before they spoke

and their answers were ones that could have easily been predicted. But as each interview progressed, the students' voices relaxed, their answers became longer and more detailed and they began to offer suggestions about how portfolios might be used and writing taught. When I asked Karen for her perceptions of this experience, she commented on how the body language of the students had changed. "They began by being very stiff," she says, "but as we spoke, they relaxed." She also told me about her pleasure and surprise at speaking to them in this way. "It was really interesting. Especially about the idea of choices. They like to have choices. All the way, along the way." She had heard the students differently and would think about making changes.

Another observation I had from listening to the conversation was how students began working through ideas and developing them. For instance, the early part of Leroy's discussion with Karen consisted mostly of "uh-huhs" and short word answers, but things changed. Listen to a piece of their conversation:

Karen: Do you have any good ideas for use of portfolios in language or in other classes? Do you think we should use them in other classes?

Leroy: Well, I'm not really sure.

Karen: Do you like having a portfolio?

Leroy: Yeah, I do a bit.

Karen: In language? Why do you like that?

Leroy: Well, it's more organized so I don't lose any of my stories especially the ones I write. It's easy to flip through a whole batch of stories.

Karen: Do you enjoy looking back halfway through the year? Look back at what you've written?

Leroy: Yup. I get some ideas.

Karen: You get some ideas. Do you ever see that your writing has improved over a period of time?

Leroy: Yup. A lot. I was not that great of a writer...

Karen: Did you save some of your stories and look back?

Leroy: No, I don't think so.

Karen: But when you're looking in your portfolio specifically, let's say right now, you looked at your portfolio and you look at the first thing you wrote about friends in your portfolio and then look at say, "The Cruise," would you see a significant difference?

Leroy: Oh yeah, oh yeah. A big difference because in friends, like I was writing about one person and I was just telling about him. In "The Cruise" I was telling about a whole adventure and it was more descriptive. And it had more ideas in it.

By speaking to Leroy, Karen can see what kind of thinking he has done about his writing. She can ask him questions and help him explore further. Through their talk, she is showing him ways he might think about his writing. As she does this, his answers lengthen and become more detailed.

In "Helping Students to Learn to Read Their Portfolios," Donald Graves notes that the portfolio movement has shown how much help students really need in order to learn to consider their own work. He talks about needing to "nudge" students at the moment of possible new learning and suggests helping them practice recognizing what makes their work good. He explains:

> Students don't suddenly become good readers of their own work. Ask them to choose their own good or important work without help and their choices will probably reflect their feelings of the moment. Further, if they are not taught the various elements that make up good writing (both in their own work and others), their criteria for making portfolio selections will be limited."[35]

It is likely difficult to know how students see their work, and what they do think good work is unless we have conversations with them. Asking them to go through some kind of choosing process first, by building an initial portfolio gives them a basis on which to talk, a place where teacher and student can meet and dwell for a time. For as Ann Berthoff maintains, "[i]t is in dialogue that meanings are created and discovered and shaped."[36]

Shirley Brice Heath, in her essay tracing the decline of oral language and performance in classrooms, describes the importance of talk during eighteenth and nineteenth century schooling and how the art of conversing was believed to lay the groundwork for the craft of writing. Its decline is a critical loss for education. The kind of world into which students graduate today demands the ability to communicate orally. As Heath points out

> [f]undamental to [the] descriptions of future workers is the recognition that workplaces must depend on collaboration and the joint construction of interpretations and alternative identifications of problems and their solutions.[37]

What better way to have students develop facility with this skill than to have them focus their talk around a meaningful portfolio gathering of their own classroom work? Through dialogue, they can be involved in the process of

self-invention, in building and dwelling.

***

> It is thus at the border between what's real and what's fictive, between what it seems possible to say, to write, but which often proves to be, at the moment of writing, unthinkable, and that which seems obvious but appears, at the last second, inexpressible, that this elusive derived writing, writing adrift, begins to make its mark.
>
> -Nicole Brossard[38]

***

Such a time there was once when things could have been different. I did not admire life, honour it, cherish my womanhood like I do now. I lived comfortably, blindly unaware of much of what was around me. When did the layers begin to come off? When did I choose to be different? I think of my grandmother now evoked and listening off stage. How as she grew older, more lonely, more confused, more demanding, I pushed her farther away from me. I could not respond to the need that submerged me, could not allow her to break the brittle shell that was around me. It was not until after she died that I began to grow into my womanhood, that my complacency began to crumble. I wonder now about my journey.

***

I felt some guilt writing this and wished I was writing something else and was frustrated that I was missing the mark I wanted and I want to hear the texture of my words.

***

Notes

1. This quote was heard at a workshop, "Women Adrift," and although I don't have the source where this might be written down, it was too good to let convention stand in the way.

2. Cited in Amy Shapiro, ed., *A Woman's Notebook* (Philadelphia, PA: Running Press, 1980), 36.

3. Lewis Carroll, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (Great Britain: Penguin, 1962), 128.

4. Donald H. Graves, "Portfolios: Keep a Good Idea Growing," in *Portfolio Portraits,* eds. Donald Graves and Bonnie S. Sunstein (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann Educational Books, 1992), 1.

5. F.Dan Seger, "Portfolio Definitions: Toward a Shared Notion," in *Portfolio Portraits,* eds. Donald Graves and Bonnie S. Sunstein (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann Educational Books, 1992), 114-115.

6. Roberta Camp, "The Place of Portfolios in Our Changing Views of Writing Assessment," in *Construction Versus Choice in Cognitive Measurement,* eds. R.E. Bennett & W.C. Ward, (Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1993).

7. See Eva L. Baker and Robert L. Linn, *Writing Portfolios: Potential for Large Scale Assessment* (Los Angeles, CA: National Center for Research on Evaluation, Standards, and Student Testing, 1992), ERIC, ED 350 312; D.J. Cole, *The Developing Professional: Process and Product Portfolios,* Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education, San Antonio, Texas, 1992), ERIC, ED 342 731; Joe B. Hansen, *A Purpose Driven Assessment Program,* Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association, San Francisco, CA, 1992, ERIC, ED 344 928.

8. Roberta Camp, "The Place of Portfolios in Our Changing Views of Writing Assessment," in *Construction Versus Choice in Cognitive Measurement,* eds. R.E. Bennett & W.C. Ward (Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1993),197.

9. Sheila W. Valencia, "Alternative Assessment: Separating the Wheat from the Chaff," *The Reading Teacher* 44(1990):60-61.

10. Kathleen Blake Yancey, "Teachers' Stories: Notes toward a Portfolio Pedagogy," in *Portfolios in the Writing Classroom*, ed. Kathleen Blake Yancey (Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English, 1992), 10.

11. Sheila W. Valencia, W. McGinley, and P.D. Pearson, *Assessing Reading and Writing: Building a More Complete Picture for Middle School Assessment* (Washington, DC: Office of Educational Research and Improvement, 1990), ERIC, ED 320 121.

12. For detailed explanation of these themes see Paulson, Paulson, & Meyer, 1991; Tierney, Carter, & Desai, 1991; Hellman, 1992; Scott, 1992; Yancey, 1992.

13. Catharine Lucas, "Introduction: Writing Portfolios--Changes and Challenges," in *Portfolios in the Writing Classroom*, ed. Kathleen Blake Yancey (Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English, 1992).

14. Catherine D'Aoust, "Portfolios: Process for Students and Teachers," in *Portfolios in the Writing Classroom*, ed. Kathleen Blake Yancey (Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English, 1992), 43.

15. Kathleen Blake Yancey, "Portfolios in the Writing Classroom: A Final Reflection," in *Portfolios in the Writing Classroom*, ed. Kathleen Blake Yancey (Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English, 1992), 104.

16. Sandra Murphy and Mary Ann Smith, "Looking into Portfolios, in *Portfolios in the Writing Classroom*, ed. Kathleen Blake Yancey (Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English, 1992), 52.

17. See Herrmann, 1989; Paulson, Paulson, and Meyer, 1991; Tierney, Carter & Desai, 1991; Frazier & Paulson, 1992; Hansen, 1992; Hellman, 1992; Scott, 1992.

18. Cited in Jon Winokur, ed., *Writers on Writing* (Philadelphia, PA: Running Press, 1986), 283.

19. Frederick Betz and Cathy Stafford, "Getting Reading for ASAP: The Making of a Portfolio," *Arizona Reading Journal* 20 (1991):36-40.

20. Grant Wiggins, "A True Test: Toward More Authentic and Equitable Assessment," *Phi Delta Kappan* 70 (1989): 703-713.

21. See Lorrie Shepard, 1989; Grant Wiggins, 1989; Suzan Harrison, 1991.

22. Joseph E. Strzepek and Mary Ann Figgins, "A Polemic on Evaluating Writing," in *Process and Portfolios in Writing Instruction,* ed. Kent Gill (Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English, 1993).

23. Lorrie Shepherd, "Why We Need Better Assessments," *Educational Leadership* (April, 1989): 4-9.

24. Linda Scott (1992) also noted that an improvement in test scores may not mean an improvement in learning as did Jay Simmons (1990). In a study of a large-scale portfolio assessment where students were asked to write a timed test as well as submit three papers representing their best work, Simmons found that the group who scored the lowest on test scores, showed the greatest gain in their portfolio mark, driving their scores up to the average test group. It seems teachers are doing a greater disservice to students by testing them than if they did nothing at all.

25. Grant Wiggins, 703-704.

26. See Donald Graves, 1983; Nancie Atwell, 1987; Denise Palmer Wolf, 1990; Sheila W. Valencia, 1990 and Darlene M. Frazier & Leon F. Paulson, 1992.

27. Pam Gilbert, *Writing, Schooling, and Deconstruction: From Voice to Text in the Classroom* (London: Routledge, 1989), 134.

28. Ibid., 133.

29. Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish,* trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage Books, 1979), 203.

30. Ibid., 220.

31. Cited in Annie Dillard, *The Writing Life* (Camp Hill, PA: Quality Paperback Books, 1990),5.

32. Martin Heidegger, "Building Dwelling Thinking," in *Martin Heidegger: Basic Writings,* ed. David Farrell Krell (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1977), 326.

33. Ibid., 331.

34. Mary Catherine Bateson, *Composing a Life* (New York: Plume Books, 1990), 28.

35. Donald Graves, "Help Students Learn to Read Their Portfolios," in *Portfolio Portraits*, eds. Donald Graves and Bonnie S. Sunstein (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann Educational Books, 1992), 94.

36. Ann Berthoff, *The Making of Meaning* (Montclair, NJ: Boynton/Cook Publishers, 1981), 111.

37. Shirley Brice Heath, "Talking the Text in Teaching Composition," in *Language, Authority, and Criticism: Reading on the Schools Textbook*, eds. Suzanne De Castell, Allan Luke, and Carmen Luke (Great Britain: The Falmer Press, 1989), 119.

38. Nicole Brossard, *The Aerial Letter*, trans., Marlene Wildeman (Toronto, ON: The Women's Press, 1988), 75-76.

CHAPTER FIVE
UNFOLDING FROM THE BOUNDARY

> I cry out, I dream, I want
> things to change. I write
> therefore.
>
> -Nicole Brossard[1]

> Often I am asked, who taught
> me how to write? Everything,
> I want to say. Everything taught
> me, everything became my teacher....
>
> -Natalie Goldberg[2]

From the Beginning

When I first conceived of this study, I had just finished a satisfying year using writing portfolios in my English language arts classroom. My excitement at the possibilities of portfolios encouraged me to think that they might have some interesting insights for teaching English. When I began my research, my questions were ones of wondering about this potential: How could I best discover what common understandings writers glean from their portfolios? Could portfolios offer a common text for students and teachers to discuss their writing and their writing process for learning and assessment? I planned to create a portfolio with this thesis and thus show what portfolios could do both through what I said and what I did. But I wasn't in the classroom long before I realized that I was not going to be able to just look at portfolios. Nothing acts in isolation in a writing classroom--everything is connected and affects everything else. A journal entry three weeks after I began my research in the class illustrates both my confusion and the broadening of my

vision:

> Am I essentially doing an ethnography? I think in a way I am--but there is also the element where I am involved--so there are two aspects here: I am studying a culture in a way, but I also am involved in that culture. I am putting myself in the situation of doing actions that will have an effect on that culture. In essence, what I am doing is going into the setting as a writer/teacher rather than a teacher/writer. The students see me as a writer. With that kind of emphasis I am able to look at the relationship differently. How would looking at this relationship differently affect the way I would then go back and teach writing? What implications might this have for other teachers and students?

I soon discovered, too, in my first interviews with the students that we could not just focus on portfolios in our discussions--they just weren't that important for students. What they did want to talk about were many different writing issues now that they had a chance to be heard. To limit our conversations would have meant missing the context in which portfolios are situated and it is this context that greatly determines how they are used.

Not only did the questions for my research change and broaden, but as I worked I realized how much of my life became threaded through this research. Books I read, even if not specifically for the study, connected in surprising ways. Movies I attended, conversations I had, and decisions I made opened important understandings for me. I found that my personal work with portfolios began to inform the questions I took to the students and the kinds of observations I made. In turn, the experiences in the classroom, affected how I viewed my own portfolio-making. The interviews with the teacher and my time spent in her classes raised questions about my own teaching which wound

through my writing and my questions about writing in the classroom. In turn, the teacher told me how our discussions helped her think about things in new ways. Most of the students commented that being involved in the group helped them think about writing in entirely new ways. There were multiple connections being formed and reformed as the study progressed, and I developed a new appreciation for how intricately we are joined through our lives to other people and the world. My new sensitivity to this interconnection first appeared in reference to my own writing during an early November journal entry:

> As I worked on the "Baby" poem today, I got a strong sense of how intertextuality works for me. As I began to work on the baby stories from Emily's life, I remembered a poem about a baby that was in my novel and this was based on a photograph in the book *The Last Best West* which was about pioneer women on the prairies. That seemed to fit the tone of what I was trying to do. Then I remembered the story about the child whose legs had to be broken to fit a coffin...that story came from somewhere I don't remember but I used it in my novel as something happening to a character and now I used it again in a slightly different form this time. As I was writing this, I could feel texts flying through my head from all over and connecting to the work I was doing. It was almost visceral.
>
> (November, 1993)

This entry was followed not long afterwards with another entry about a serendipitous event--what Jung would call synchronicity--that deepened my awareness of interconnection.

> Today, when I told the students about my work with Emily Carr, Jordan told me that her grandmother had been a kindergarten student in Emily Carr's sister's school. I wondered at the chances of this connection happening. From a small private school in

> Victoria run by Emily's sister, Alice, to St. Albert where I happened to choose the granddaughter of a pupil while I was working with Emily's material. I felt awed.

When I actually sat down to write this study, the power of such connections at work in my writing came to the fore. The general shape of this thesis arose from my broadening vision. I knew I wanted to set portfolios in the kind of context where I had done my thinking and work--not only the writing classroom but also my writing space at home. Once I envisioned the general shape, I found that almost without effort a way of working suggested itself. For each chapter, several days would be spent collecting pieces of data that seemed relevant; I would search out and read or reread books that connected to what I was thinking; and I would take little notes about conversations that had twigged an idea or a story I heard. I would check pages of my journal and sometimes dream an image that became important. Quotations would gather in my file folder and I would begin to have a sense of important metaphors for that particular chapter. Sitting down to write then became a gathering of those threads, weaving them into text(iles).

Through these demonstrations of interconnectedness, I realized how everything in my life somehow is woven in the meaning that I am creating. Even when I am not writing, I am working toward writing; putting words onto the page is just a clearer marking of the journey I am on. I no longer feel so divided about teaching and writing, and I have some possible responses to my earlier journal entry which asked: How would looking at this relationship differently affect the way I would then go back and teach writing? And what implications might this have for other teachers and students? I would like to add one more question to explore

in this chapter: What has the work in this study meant for my future work in research, teaching, and writing?

Who Has Response-ability: Difficulties in Writing Pedagogy

> Writing and reading mean being aware of the writer's notions of risk and safety, the serene achievement of, or sweaty fight for, meaning and response-ability.
>
> -Toni Morrison[3]

My experience of searching for a satisfactory way to teach writing in school is not unique. Most of my colleagues struggle with this issue. Some cling to teaching the way they were taught even though they know that the curriculum has changed. Others vacillate between old familiarity and dangerous new territory while still others jump on every bandwagon and change that comes along.[4] Pam Gilbert describes how much of the research data collected about the teaching of writing agrees that there is an absence of unifying assumptions that guide classroom practice and that teachers seem to move uncertainly between positions rather than working within a particular pedagogy. To consciously work within a particular pedagogy means that teachers must be aware of how their beliefs and teaching styles function within that pedagogy. Jack Hodgins' advice to writers could easily apply to teachers:

> There is little point in shopping for a theory to "adopt" for the sake of fashion or comradeship, however. I believe the only theory worth having is the one you work out for yourself in a manner that is consistent with the way you see the world--even if, in the process, your view of the world may be altered.[5]

This lack of certainty about where we are going in writing classrooms and what we are accomplishing makes English teachers susceptible to new ideas simply because the old do not seem satisfactory. This phenomenon, in some part, has led to an enthusiastic adoption of the writing workshop model and the writing process without a clear understanding of the implications. There is the assumption that we are doing what "real" writers do and that we are creating romantic garrets where tomorrow's masterpieces can be germinated. But I think we need to ask ourselves why we're teaching writing in school.

Certainly we are not preparing all our students to be professional writers. The Alberta junior high language arts curriculum requires that seven main concepts be taught. The concepts required range from discovering, expressing, organizing, developing, and revising, to editing ideas and language. They ask for competency and flexibility in a variety of writing situations, stating that writing to learn is as important as learning to write. Finally, the curriculum notes that "personal enjoyment and satisfaction in writing develop through being involved in meaningful writing experiences."[6] There is no request that students be published or become authors. They are to learn to use language fluidly as a way to come to understanding and make meaning. Why then, is there the notion that our language arts classes should be filled with writers who are doing what the "real" writers do? Do we believe that if we hold out the image of the book with its accompanying author that students will be more motivated to write? Hear what some writing researchers believe:

> Throughout the curriculum, the message must be clear that authoring is valued, and that even very young students are truly respected as authors. The responsibility and ownership of authoring...[is

> put] in the hands of *students*. (Harste, Short, & Burke)[7]
>
> ***
>
> It is essential that children...perceive themselves as authors. (Lucy Calkins)[8]
>
> ***
>
> *[N]o distinctions are made* between the reading of children's writing and the writing of professionals. Both are treated as important writing with the same scrutiny given to the information in each by using the same process: receive the work, discuss what is contained in the piece, then formulate questions for the author. The mystique of authorship is removed that children may find out the beauty and depth of information contained in literature itself. It is removed that children might learn to think and experience the joys of authorship for themselves. [Emphasis his] (Donald Graves)[9]

What are the implications for giving students the label of author? Are we encouraging them to tell their personal stories and aim for their best writing? Or are we placing a burdensome mantle on their shoulders? During the Middle Ages, writing, particularly that which we call "literary," was seen as part of a collective enterprise, expressing no one single vision, but rather offering a general outlook of the culture at large. Only when there was a need to reduce fiction's power and threat to society did individual authors began to be associated with literary work. Foucault describes what this ownership/authorship of a text meant:

> Texts, books, and discourses really began to have authors (other than mythical, "sacralized" and "sacralizing" figures) to the extent that authors became subject to punishment, that is, to the extent that discourses could be transgressive.[10]

This, of course, put tremendous responsibility on the author. That sense of responsibility is still there today

as modern literary criticism sees authors as needing to explain the presence of certain events in a work as well as their transformations, distortions, and modifications of that event. One need only think about Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses* to understand the extent to which this responsibility can reach.[11]

David Jardine makes the point that by naming children "authors," adults are giving students a burden of maturity and responsibility that they would not take on themselves. Few teachers, he suggests, would call themselves authors. To give this title to children is to abdicate an educator's responsibility to give students the security and protection necessary to experiment with writing.

> Certainly, children experience a version of this process [authoring] when they share their work with other children in their class. But again, this process takes place in the shelter of the school, and this process is inevitably shaped to this pedagogic end. Simply put, it is the mandate of the school that all children should learn to write to a certain level of enjoyment and competence. However, not all of us wish to be known for what we write. Not all of us wish to have our understanding of who we deeply are at stake in what we write--"author" as something wrapped up in the being of the object named. Attempting to mandate *this* by indiscriminately naming all children authors is pedagogically irresponsible." [12]

Blithely using the term "author" also diminishes the importance of the role. Do we call students in science class "scientists" or math students "mathematicians"? Authorship is something one should choose to work toward and something that is bestowed as part of one's agreement to take on the responsibility. To do otherwise is to disregard all the tensions, difficulties, and joys inherent to

authoring.

And because authors are usually thought to dwell on personal experience and then express their unique visions, when we call children "authors," does this mean we expect them to do the same? Here is Lucy Calkins answer:

> I know that teaching writing begins with the recognition that each individual comes to the writing workshop with concerns, ideas, memories, and feelings. Our job as teachers is to listen and to help them listen. 'What are the things you know and care about?'[13]

Pam Gilbert points out the difficulties this kind of thinking creates in a classroom.

> This notion of the student writer as 'creative artist' presents a number of contradictions for school writing....If school writing is authoring, and therefore creative expression of personal imagination and vision, can it be taught? And who has greater access to the types of personal imagination and vision that school teachers are likely to recognize and respect? If authoring cannot be taught, if it is inspirational and subjective, then what is the role of the teacher in the school writing classroom?[14]

Seeing students as authors, as creators of a personal vision, effectively depoliticizes the classroom because students can be convinced that since it is their personal creation, they own their texts. These texts, then, are no longer sited within the school's power relationships. Students can "pretend to be authors. They might even be asked to sit in the 'author's chair.' Teachers can then also pretend to be 'readers' rather than evaluators, assessors, and correctors."[15] This process is another example of teachers trying to make their gaze symmetrical to

that of the students'. As Madeleine Grumet has pointed out, this hides the real power structure of the classroom.

> In an attempt to dissociate themselves from an authority that disallows dialogue, many teachers have adopted the stance of humanistic psychology that would replace the look of domination with the mutuality of egalitarianism. Loath to dominate others or be objectified under the gaze of their students, they strive for reciprocity.[16]

Mary Catherine Bateson agrees that symmetrical relationships are not always the source of comradeship they appear to be. Women in particular have opted for this model because the asymmetry of gender relationships has been so exploitive in the past, she tells us. But symmetry often promotes competition and conflict instead. As an example, she refers to stories of Biblical brothers like Cain and Abel.[17] In the classroom, conflict can occur when teachers stop being only readers and actually evaluate the student's text as adequate or inadequate. It is at that point that the student may feel personally evaluated and experience difficulty with the process.

Such depoliticizing has given writing pedagogy a conflicting sense of the private and the public. Willinsky points out that the New Literacy has invested heavily in the "rhetoric of individual expression and voice" as a form of personal growth where the individual searches for the meanings deep within the self and increasingly goes public with them. But as Willinsky rightly notes, this private meeting of self and word still partakes of the public sphere. The self really is learned in communal activity since what we overhear in language and the imagery of our culture shapes our selves. This meaning is further developed through dialogue.[18] Ian Hacking suggests that

"there is nothing private about the use of acquired words and practical techniques....[T]he cunning of conscience and self-knowledge is to make it *feel* private."[19]

What writing instruction really needs is for the classroom to be a location where students can dwell in writing and where there are safe boundaries from which they can unfold in many directions. As I noted in the first chapter, the times when I felt most successful as a student writer in school were when I felt the space had been created--both physically and psychologically--where I could have time to gather my words and construct the piece of writing I really wanted to write. Just the space was needed; not the burden of authorship.

Creating this space means that teachers have to understand how writing happens--not from reading a textbook--but from writing themselves. And this means learning to find that space in a location outside of the classroom to really know what it feels like; then a teacher can come into the classroom and talk about finding this place and set up the right conditions for her or his students. As a teacher and a writer, I knew what finding this space meant, but I also knew that I couldn't construct it in school for myself. In the classroom, I had to be the "spacemaker;" the one who would be there to call students back from the other side of the magic mirror when the class was over. What I didn't understand then, however, was that I could use my knowledge of finding this space and talk about it to my students and show them ways of creating the spaces they needed without actually having to really manage to be in it myself during class.

I realized this difference between being the teacher in

writing class and being the student most clearly when I participated in a three day lesson during the study. Like the students, I sat in a desk and followed Karen's instructions. Here is a piece from my journal during that time:

> She asks us to take the piece of paper out of our binders and start on a new page. Although I can't do that because I don't have a binder, I still have a niggling of discomfort at not exactly following instructions...Even while she's giving them the focus, my mind is running ahead planning what I will write...I had thought of beginning my paragraph with the words from the song. When Karen suggests it too, I am disappointed. It was my idea. I am pulling on my own experiences with Christmas here...Out of habit I feel all the competing demands for students' attention, but now it's going away... I surface near the end of class realizing that I haven't heard anything going on around me. I've only been writing. I want to share this with someone while it's hot. Now I know why I couldn't write in class when I was the teacher. I wouldn't dare lose myself like this.
>
> (December, 1993)

As I thought more about creating this kind of space in the classroom for writing, I began to visualize how that could happen and what a teacher would have to do to accomplish this.

> The way I go into certain processes is fairly chaotic, not very clear to me. You respond to a chain of events that happen when you work. You first have to create a drama on canvas that is very disturbing. You don't actually know what it is. You don't even like it, and then through looking at it more, getting more familiar with what's going on, you get some more clarity.
>
> - Nachume Miller[20]

One image that has been a powerful metaphor for me in teaching is that of constructing a framework, of building something wherein students can work. The important thing, I think, is that creating or constructing such a place gives a sense of unity to the writing space. There are boundaries, places of unfolding, for students. What often happens instead in schools is that the writing spaces are divided. "Today we are doing creative writing, tomorrow we are sharing personal stories, on Friday we will write expository paragraphs, and next week will be the five paragraph essay." With all the differentiations, writing seems like a never-ending series of requirements and definitions that one must memorize in order to write.

In an effort to move writing away from such divisioning, the description of the writing process was developed. But the breaking down of writing into a discrete series of process steps has had nearly the same effect as earlier differentiations. As Ann Berthoff points out, students prewrite by amassing the slottables and then rewrite by checking what has been slotted. Instead of broadening the vision of teaching writing, the process has

often added more hoops for the teacher to set up and more definitions of writing for the student to learn. I think there are better ways of sharing how writing works with students. Ann Berthoff suggests something called the "allatonceness" of writing:

> In composing, everything happens at once--or it doesn't happen at all. We make new meanings by means of old ones; we discover what we want to say as we say it and tell ourselves what it is that we are saying; we continually identify relationships and how relationships relate to one another. And all that thinking and languaging is going on as we are trying to construct sentences and paragraphs.[21]

This describes how I usually think of writing; this is how I write. It is this *allatonceness* that gives the writer her holographic vision described in Chapter Three.

Berthoff's visual model of this *allatonceness* is the double helix. At any twist of the helix, she proposes, we meet the same activities over and over. Ken Macrorie uses a similar image of the Moebius Loop to talk about how one alternates between conscious and unconscious behaviour while writing. While I am not sure I would use the labels conscious and unconscious, this is a simpler model that could be shared with students. The loop can be made by cutting a strip of paper about a centimeter wide, giving it a twist and taping the ends together. A pencil point placed on the loop and held while the paper is drawn through its length, will mark both sides of the paper and end up at the beginning--like the process of moving between levels of writing. Macrorie tells students that "they will get on the Moebius Loop" by employing the unconscious in writing freely and by employing the conscious when they act as editors.[22]

To share these images with students is useful but hardly enough to teach writing. This would be comparable to what Raymond Rodrigues calls the worst scenario of the writing process where "converts accepted the process at its most shallow level and believed that all we had to do was encourage students to write and they would automatically improve."[23] Not only do students need other ways of experiencing the *allatonceness* of writing, but they need to be pointed to particular things that might happen during the writing so they can both recognize and use these opportunities.

One of the most important things to learn is the need to remain for a time ambiguous and tentative while writing no matter how difficult this might be. Berthoff calls this ambiguity "the hinges of thought."

> Learning to write is a matter of learning to tolerate ambiguity, of learning that the making of meaning is a dialectical process determined by perspective and context. Meanings change as we think about them; statements and events, significances and interpretations can mean different things to different people at different times. Meanings are not prebaked or set for all time; they are created, found, formed, and reformed.[24]

This state of uncertainty is what poet John Keats called "Negative Capability," the ability to be "in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts." He believed that such ambiguity is the key to the artist's creative power.[25]

One way to learn to appreciate and use ambiguity is to understand the uses of chaos. Language, Berthoff suggests, gives us the power to generate chaos, but also to find ways out of it. Learning about chaos is to learn the power of

language to generate sources of meaning. "Our students can learn to write only if we give them back their language, and that means playing with it, working with it, using it instrumentally, making many starts."[26] When I think back to my favourite writing course, we spent much of the time doing what I would call language play. One assignment asked us to choose a random selection of books from our shelves and then pull intriguing lines, making a list as we went. Then, we were to arrange that list into a poem. A similar request had us fold two different pages in half and place them against one another to create new lines. For another assignment we searched for word derivations and worked with the different meanings of words. Still another asked us to play with the letters of our names. Throughout the course, we were encouraged to spend five or ten minutes every day just writing pages of words that came into our heads. I remember clearly that this is where I really began to feel language--its resonance, its shape, its multiple meanings. And I began to understand how I could create meaning from it.

We can further encourage students to tolerate ambiguity by the kinds of comments we offer their writing. Comments that suggest alternate readings as they work open up possibilities. For instance, asking a student to think about what would happen if they changed one event in their story can help them see that nothing is fixed, that many possibilities are open to them. Instead of always accepting what they write the first time, they can be encouraged to be open to diversity. This can only be done, however, if the student's words are not thought to be too personal and sacrosanct and if the classroom is a space for playing with and sharing language rather than a place where individuals work often in isolation.

While ambiguity is part of composing so is learning to use limits, to choose by looking and thinking as we write, and to see relationships. Hear Ann Berthoff:

> No thinking--no composing--could happen if we had no means of stabilizing images of what we have seen, of recalling them as forms to think about and to think *with*. Language is our means of *re*presenting images as forms: *forming* is our means of seeing relationships from one or another perspective and in different contexts. Writing teachers have not, generally speaking, taken advantage of this power of language and mind--it was once called *imagination*--because linguistics...has no way of accounting for it.[27]

Learning to look again and to see in new ways helps the familiar to become strange and the strange to become familiar as the imagination forms relationships. I remember bringing in common objects for students to examine and asking them to see them in different ways and then to write about it. One handful of Christmas nuts, an assortment of sea shells, and simple kitchen utensils each in turn elicited an amazing range of stories. Other times, I have given students two pictures from different contexts and asked them to create relationships between the two, imagining the connections.

When I was writing my novel, I learned to be more aware of all the potential relationships formed through writing. The arrangement of characters' voices, the images that recurred, the words that suggested themes, one paragraph leading to another all formed patterns of relationship that helped create a unified work. Ursula Le Guin describes these relationships very clearly through her recognition of the five kinds of patterns in her work: There is the pattern of language through the sounds of words. Grammar and syntax

create another pattern which builds to give the work tempo, pace, gait, and shape in time. Then there is the pattern of images and that of ideas that run through the story. Finally, there is the pattern of feeling--what the work helps us experience emotionally and spiritually.[28]

We can begin by designing opportunities in the classroom for students to see relationships, talking about how these are formed and what we see. We can begin by encouraging the reading of good writing, especially out loud where students hear the relationship of sounds, images, ideas, and events and where we can to point to the possibilities present.

Finally, we need to rediscover the uses of dialogue in the classroom. As I described in chapter four, the power of portfolios lies in the kind of talk they can generate. The writing classroom needs to be a place where it is demonstrated how language is used to make meaning as well as the power it has to reach others and form communities with them. As Willinsky rightly points out, "[i]t no longer makes sense for New Literacy programs to strive toward a literate community in the classroom while continuing to speak of literacy principally in personal and individual terms of self-realization."[29] Bruner, too, clearly has come to understand that construction of meaning is a cultural process rather than the solitary invention of the individual.

> I have come increasingly to recognize that most learning in most settings is a communal activity; a sharing of culture. It is not just that the child must make his [*sic*] knowledge his own, but that he must make it his own in a community of those who share his sense of belonging to a culture.[30]

At this point, I think it is important to distinguish between the practice of dividing students into peer response groups and the kind of dialogue about which I am writing. Students have often been expected to carry on conversations about each other's work with little idea about how this is to be done. Most of the students in my study saw peer response as just an opportunity for praise and not much else. Instead, dialogue has a much broader view and needs to be modelled and experienced by everyone. A dialogic classroom becomes a polyphony of voices that offer a multiple of perspectives. The vision of Tolstoy's classroom where students swarmed about his armchair questioning, talking, and arguing is an image that comes to my mind. And perhaps it is Tolstoy's words that best sum up how writing should be taught: "Therefore, it is my conviction that we cannot teach children in general, and peasant children in particular, to write and compose. All we can do is to teach them how to go about writing."[31]

Going on From Here

> The role of the writers is not to say what we can all say, but what we are unable to say.
>
> -Anaïs Nin[32]

After working through this study, I have a greater appreciation for and a different understanding of boundaries. As Heidegger makes clear in his writing, boundaries are not stopping places but points of opportunity. Before beginning my research, I had been aware of how boundaries were not really blockages in writing, and had stopped thinking much about lines between poetry, prose, fiction and non-fiction. But between being a teacher and

writer and between writing my fiction and writing my research there were clear stopping places, what I would have called boundaries. Now, however, I see these boundaries as places where such roles and activities can meet and unfold in new and interesting ways.

This thinking about boundaries first began to gather in my writing about Emily Carr. I found that I was not able to keep our lives--hers and mine--separate on the page. Her words kept pulling at my experience as mine sought hers.

***

STAR STORIES

September, 1935
Goodbye to these intimate friends, the trees, and this slice of deep sky over my field that is fuller with stars than any sky I've ever seen.

I remember as a child coming home in the wintertime from somewhere and getting out of the car in the darkness and looking up and seeing the sky so full of stars that one seemed to crowd out another. The cold, the brightness, took my breath away. Gave me a sense of holy.

One night, when Sara was just a few months old (four or five at the most), we arrived home from a day in the city. The night sky was so full of stars that we just sat for a few minutes in our driveway, looking up. We slipped Sara out of her carseat and I lay her on my lap so she could see the sky too. She watched intently and after a few moments, the strangest look came into her eyes. One of recognition, of knowing. I had never seen such a look on her face before. Then she laughed out loud as if sharing a joke with someone. Kevin and I were startled. We both could see she had made some connection far beyond us. Afterwards I wondered if she had seen my grandfather in the stars, the one whose middle name she shares, the one who died long before she was born. Something in the warmth of that connection reminded me of myself long ago, a small child asleep on my grandfather's flannel shirted chest. Safe. Connected.

December, 1935

When you look straight up you see above the mist and the sky is deep blue-black peppered with stars. Stars frighten me

and that awful space between you and them, terrifying, unknown, filled with lights and colours and sounds that we don't know yet.

The other day Kevin told me, as we looked at the pale orange sky in the winter city, that he had never known how many stars there were in the sky until he was sixteen and left the city for the weekend to go camping. I lived most of my childhood not knowing, he said.

My sisters and I would lie in the back of our stationwagon on the way home to our farm at night and search for Orion. The Big Dipper was easy, but Orion was a challenge. I think the four of us liked the idea of a big strong male hunter striding across the sky, a dog at his heels. It added excitement to the brightly lit stage. But what we didn't know then, was that the Hunter is elusive. Sometimes he's there, sometimes he's not. Not something to be counted on.

Even stars burn out sometime.

***

Her words, my words. (Non)fictionpoetry.

And then as the boundaries changed in my writing, so did my thinking about writing in the classroom. Here there seemed to be only boundaries for stopping: write this topic, this many words, for this many days. Students were divided into classrooms with walls, were taught separate subjects with different expectations, and were given assignments with little connection. As I listened to the students I heard that they did not want to be cut loose to drift, but that they wanted choice and more independence in making decisions. They wanted boundaries from which they could work their possibilities. And I heard Karen's image of school walls coming down metaphorically. The portfolio created new boundaries where the student work from several teachers could be collected and shared for greater understanding.

As the boundaries of school and writing changed, so did my understanding of research. From the beginning I had been

hard pressed to name my research, thinking that I had to call it something--ethnography, action research, case study. But I never did find a label that quite fit for me. I found my research methods depended on the day, the students, what I still felt I needed to know, and the directions things were unfolding. I came to see that the important part of research was being aware of what was occurring--looking and looking again and finding relationships between ideas. I like the way anthropologist Clifford Geertz explains it:

> The first question, call it that of signature, is a matter of the construction of a writerly identity. The second, call it that of discourse, is a matter of developing a way of putting things--a vocabulary, a rhetoric, a pattern of argument--that is connected to that identity in such a way that it seems to come from it as a remark from a mind.[33]

A pattern again, a way of putting things together. When I came to write about my research, I found that there was no separating who I am as a fiction writer and poet from a writer of research. I could not always separate what might be called a fictional technique and what might be called research methods. And because I was so familiar with the setting and the subject in which I was doing my research, I had to work at making the familiar strange. But because I had not done extensive research before nor much academic writing, I also had to make the strange familiar. What has happened through this process has been one of my best learning experiences. Through this work, I have come to see how I understood my life as a writer and a teacher, how I see it now, and how I will be forever changed by this work I have done. *Silences* lies open on my desk--waiting.

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Writing has been the constancy through which I
have reinvented myself after every uprooting.

-Mary Catherine Bateson[34]

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As I cultivate my nature, all else follows...
Your thesis will be a valuable reference for other scholars
I have progressed
far enough
if it can be easily located within libraries
for a measure of safety, of surety in my position
a completion of beginnings
Retrieval systems use the key words in the title
marking a time of joyous deliverance
of new life
A new path
to locate your thesis.
All things change and we cannot live permanently
among obstructions
It is essential that the title be meaningful and
With deliverance comes the release of tensions
descriptive of the content of the work
As I resolve and clear away the old, I experience joy
Praise be.
If possible...
The river flows

Notes

1. Nicole Brossard, *The Aerial Letter*, trans. Marlene Wildeman, (Toronto, ON:The Women's Press, 1988), 37.

2. Natalie Goldberg, *The Long Quiet Highway: Waking Up in America* (New York: Bantam Books, 1993), 19.

3. Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (Cambridge, MA:Harvard University Press, 1992), xi.

4. Sharon Crowley suggests that it is important for teachers to realize that they may hold unexamined or conflicting theories. A teacher who does not pursue pedagogical self-knowledge, she suggests, is liable to confuse students in fundamental ways; for example, accepting process pedagogy without rejecting traditional composition theory. See *A Teacher's Introduction to Deconstruction* (Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English, 1989).

5. Jack Hodgins, *The Natural Storyteller* (Toronto, ON: A Douglas Gibson Book, 1993), 17.

6. Alberta Education, *Curriculum Guide Junior High Language Arts* (Edmonton: Alberta Curriculum Branch, 1987),19.

7. Cited in David Jardine, "Naming Children 'Authors,'" *Reflections on Canadian Literacy*, n.s. 10 (1992): 168-173.

8. Lucy Calkins, *The Art of Teaching Writing* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann Books, 1986), 9.

9. Donald Graves, *Writing: Teachers and Children at Work* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann Books,1983), 67.

10. Michel Foucault, "What is an Author?" in *The Foucault Reader*, ed. P. Rabinow (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984), 108.

11. When the novel was published in 1989, the Ayatollah Khomeni of Iran, seeing the book a threat to Islam, declared that it was a heretical text and put out a death warrant for Rushdie which holds to this day.

12. David Jardine.

13. Lucy Calkins, *The Art of Teaching Writing* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann Books, 1986), 5.

14. Pam Gilbert, *Writing, Schooling, and Deconstruction: From Voice to Text in the Classroom* (London: Routledge, 1989), 82.

15. Ibid, 18.

16. Madeleine Grumet, *Bitter Milk* (Amherst, MA: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1988), 115.

17. Mary Catherine Bateson, *Composing a Life* (New York: Plume Books, 1990).

18. Refer to Ann Berthoff's quote in Chapter Four regarding dialogue and meaning.

19. Ian Hacking,"Self-improvement," in *Foucault: A Critical Reader,* ed. D.C. Hoy (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986), 236.

20. Nachume Miller is a New York painter who participated in a 1989 arts exhibit on chaos. He is cited in John Briggs, *Fractal: The Patterns of Chaos* (New York: Touchstone Press,1992), 28.

21. Ann Berthoff, *Forming, Thinking, Writing* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann Educational Books, 1988), 61.

22. Ken Macrorie, *Telling Writing* (Montclair, NJ: Boynton/Cook Publishers, 1985), 8-9.

23. Raymond J. Rodgrigues,"Moving Away from Writing-Process Workshop," *English Journal* (September, 1985):24-27.

24. Ann Berthoff, *The Making of Meaning* (Montclair, NJ: Boynton/Cook Publishers, 1981), 71.

25. Cited in John Briggs, *Fractal: The Patterns of Chaos* (New York: Touchstone Press, 1992), 27.

26. Ann Berthoff, *The Making of Meaning*, 70.

27. Ibid, 35.

28. Ursula Le Guin, "Where do You Get Your Ideas From?" in *Dancing at the Edge of the World* (New York: Harper & Row,1989), 194.

29. John Willinsky, *The New Literacy:Redefining Reading and Writing in the Schools* (New York: Routledge, 1990),206.

30. Jerome Bruner, *Actual Minds, Possible Worlds* (Cambridge, MA:Harvard University Press, 1986), 127.

31. Cited in Ann Berthoff, *The Making of Meaning*, 144-145.

32. Cited in Jon Winodur, ed., *Writers on Writing* (Philadelphia, PA: Running Press, 1990.)

33. Clifford Geertz, *Works and Lives: The Anthropologist as Author*. (Stanford, CA: University Press, 1988), 9. I like his suggestion that one must be both a cartographer and a pilgrim when reporting research.

34. Mary Catherine Bateson, 223.

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